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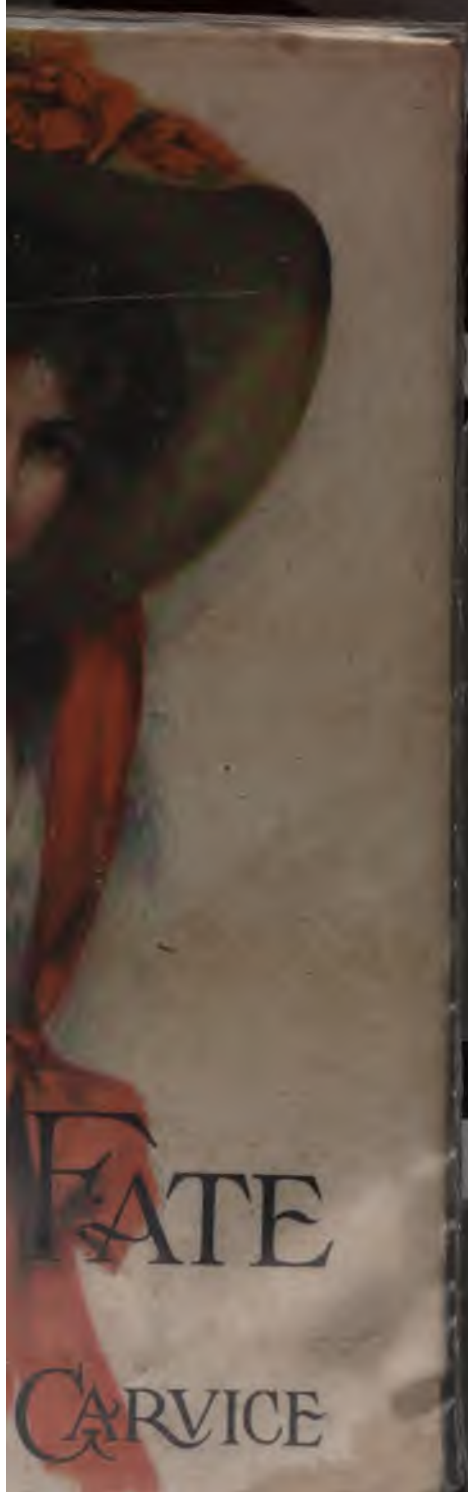
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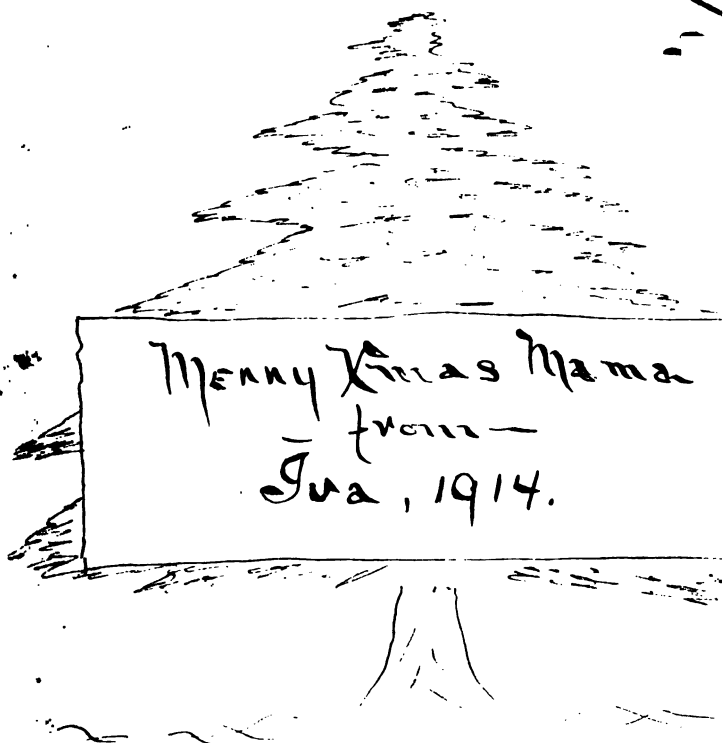
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KYRA'S FATE

Or, Love Knows No Bonds

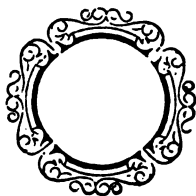
By CHARLES GARVICE

AUTHOR OF

"Linked By Fate," "The Verdict of the Heart,"

"A Girl of Spirit," "A Jest of Fate,

"The Other Woman," Etc.



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KYRA'S FATE



KYRA'S FATE.

CHAPTER I.

"Is she asleep or is it one of those trances of hers?"

Two men stood beside a couch upon which a girl was stretched—a startlingly graceful figure in as startling an attitude: full length, with one arm under her head, the other hanging down, and her slight form as straight as an arrow. It was as if she had fallen there, attacked by a sudden faintness or its elder brother—Death itself.

The light from the setting sun, the warm light of an evening in early summer, poured through the open French window and touched the pallor of the girl's face, which, but for the roseate light, would have been white as a tea-rose or old ivory. She was exquisitely graceful; she was, even with her eyes closed, as exquisitely beautiful: a clear, oval face, rather longer than the English type, with soft, black hair, through which ran strands that shone like silk; long lashes as dark as her hair, and brows straight and almost meeting. The mouth was not small, but full of expression, and there was a subtle curve in the pale lips which had a touching quality; it spoke of grief, it whispered mutely of all the awful possibilities of a woman's nature; of love yet unawakened, of capacity for the pain which stalks with silent feet behind passion.

She wore a black dress of light cashmere, which fell in folds about her figure that suggested something foreign in its arrangement, the something which snatches an art beyond the reach of the purely British. There was an edging of white insertion at her white and superbly modelled neck and at the wrists of the long and shapely hand. A remarkable face and form under any circumstances, still more remarkable as she lay there in a sleep that was so deep that it resembled a trance.

The elder of the two men—a middle-aged man with iron-grey hair and clean-shaven face, with eyes that had something

furtive in their expression, and a mouth with the trick of twitching at its left corner—shook his head doubtfully. The younger—a tall, thin man with a curious resemblance to the elder, even to a faint copy of the furtiveness in the eyes and the twitch of the lips—they were father and son—shrugged his shoulders impatiently yet smoothly, as if he were in the habit of keeping a close watch upon himself.

"You ought to know," he said, with the same suppression in his voice as in his gesture. "You have been with her, seen her all these months."

"All the same, I can't tell," said Mr. Froyte, in a low voice. "I don't think even your mother can. Sometimes, I believe, she steals from sleep to trance. It's a trick of the race her mother came from. It is well known in India. I forget what they call it."

"Clairvoyance?" suggested Stracey Froyte, gazing at the beautiful face under his lowered lids and biting his narrow lips, softly.

"No, not at all. Quite different. She sees no visions—at any rate, she remembers none, and—oh, no, it's not like any of that mesmerism nonsense. It is just a sleep that's so deep as to be—be like death."

He glanced furtively at his son's face, which, for a moment, grew sinister, but for a moment only; then, as if the pause were irksome, he went on:

"Though she appears in the most perfect health, I—your mother—thought it best to have a doctor: this place may not suit Kyra; it's too soon to tell, of course. But—oh, yes, it is better to have a doctor."

The young man nodded.

"Of course," he said, evading his father's sidelong look.

"You know how nervous your mother is. Hush, here she is!"

The door opened and Mrs. Froyte entered. She was a weak-looking woman, dressed in black, with hair prematurely grey; eyes that were downcast, as if weighted by some doubt or dread. She started slightly as she saw the two men.

"The doctor, James," she said, in a subdued, toneless voice; and she went and stood by the girl, and looked down at her with a curious mixture of pity and aloofness; as if she were afraid to display any tenderness she might feel.

"I will go and see him," said Mr. Froyte.

He glanced inquiringly at his son, who nodded and followed him into the next room, where the doctor was waiting, with the patient impatience of his tribe.

"I have sent for you to see my ward, Miss Jermyn, Doctor



Graham," said Mr. Froyte, with a bow and a wave of his hand to a chair.

The doctor looked calmly and keenly from one man to the other, and Mr. Froyte continued the wave of the hand towards his son.

"My son, doctor."

The doctor bowed slightly—doctors have a trying knack of reading characters from faces, and Doctor Graham was not prepossessed by Stracey Froyte's, handsome though it was.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

"Not much, nothing serious, I trust," said Mr. Froyte, slowly, and looking down at the carpet. "My ward has had a heavy bereavement: she lost her father twelve—nearly twelve—months ago. It was a very great shock—Mr. Jermyn died suddenly—they were much attached to each other—peculiarly so—and her grief has produced a weakness, a lassitude and apathy—"

The doctor broke in upon the slow voice and careful statement.

"Want of tone: run down, eh?" he said.

"Y-es; but that is not all. My ward is subject to trances—"

"To what?" interjected Doctor Graham, sharply.

"Well, perhaps I use the wrong term. At times she falls into so deep a sleep that she seems to be scarcely alive; there is very little sign of breathing. It is difficult to wake her; in fact, we fear to do so, and allow her to wake of her own accord."

"Hem! yes. Indicative of weakness following prostration from shock," commented Doctor Graham.

"No doubt it would be, in ordinary cases; but in my ward's the cause dates further back; these trances are—what shall I say?—constitutional, inherited. I ought to tell you, doctor, that her father—he was in the Indian Civil Service—married a lady of mixed race."

"Indian—Hindoo—Brahmin?" queried the doctor.

"Something of the kind," assented Mr. Froyte. "Mr. Jermyn met her in India, of course; he fell in love with her—she was an extraordinarily beautiful woman, I believe—I never saw her, for she died in giving birth to Kyra—my ward's name is Oriental, you perceive."

The doctor nodded, as if he were interested.

"These mixed marriages are sometimes productive of strange issues," he said. "In some cases the offspring display tendencies which are distinctly Oriental—especially if the mother is Asiatic. Have you had other medical advice?"

"Well, no," replied Mr. Froyte. "We thought that my ward's condition was caused by the shock of her father's death; and, hoping that change would benefit her, have been traveling on the continent and elsewhere. We were recommended to come here, and I took this house, furnished, and have been here about a month."

"Have you tried tonics and exercise—riding, walking?" Doctor Graham looked at Stracey, whose sharp profile was silhouetted against the sunlit window. "Young and cheerful companionship is usually the best tonic in such cases."

Stracey Froyte turned his head slightly, as if he felt the doctor's glance.

"Miss Jermyn walks and rides sometimes with me," he said; "but she generally prefers to be alone."

The doctor nodded.

"Yes. Symptomatic of her condition. Well, I'll see her, please."

Mr. Froyte conducted him to the next room. Mrs. Froyte was still standing at the head of the couch looking down at the death-like figure, and her husband introduced her, under his breath. Doctor Graham bowed.

"Leave her with me and Mrs. Froyte," he said, his eyes fixed on the girl's face, as if he were—doctor as he was—startled by its beauty.

Stracey had not moved and did not turn his head when his father entered the drawing-room and sat down softly, but presently got up and fidgetted about the room, every now and then glancing at the handsome, impassive face which seemed to be guarding the secret of its owner's thoughts.

After awhile, Doctor Graham re-entered the room, and James Froyte turned to him expectantly; but Stracey did not move.

"It is a trance," he said. "One of a kind with which I am unacquainted. I mean personally; I have read about them. It is, as you suggested, Oriental in its nature. She is still—sleeping. You are right not to wake her. While the trances continue—I hope to prevent their occurrence—let her alone. I will send her a tonic. It will not be an ordinary one, and I must ask you to follow carefully the directions for its administration—or—well, there will be trouble. For the rest, see that she takes plenty of exercise; tempt her appetite; but, more important than anything else, tempt her away from herself and her grief. Persuade her, if you can without worry—her, to permit you to accompany her in her walks and Get her to ride as much as possible. She ought to



have society: there are some young people in this place, quiet and secluded as it is, and she would be all the better for their society. You are new-comers—I will see what can be done in that direction, if you will allow me."

Mr. Froyte thanked him. There was a pause, then he said in his slow, careful way:

"There is nothing serious, no danger of—"

Doctor Graham was silent for a moment, as he put on his gloves.

"No organic disease, no; but girls of her age and in her condition have an awkward knack of developing serious symptoms, if the trouble be not checked. There is no cause for alarm at present; indeed, but for these peculiar trances, and the want of tone, she appears to be in good health—an almost perfect specimen of the form and face divine," he added almost to himself; "but she requires watching. I will call and see her to-morrow and have a talk with her. I have asked Mrs. Froyte to be careful of that medicine. Just the dose indicated, no more and no less. Good-day."

With his professional short nod, and a glance at the younger of the men, Doctor Graham went out. As he passed the door of the other room he heard a girl's voice: evidently Miss Jermyn's. He paused and listened, and was struck by the tone of the voice, as he had been struck by the beauty of the face. It was musical, there was just the suspicion of a foreign accent—a soft, harmonious sweetness in it—and it was the voice of a lady, of a person higher in the social scale than the Froytes. The strain of sadness and wistfulness in it made it all the sweeter and more impressive.

He had his hand on the handle of the door, but did not turn it: he would think the case out, look up some of the authorities on trances, before he saw her. So that when Mrs. Froyte came out in search of him he had already left the house and was half-way down the drive. She stood irresolutely and watched him, then came back to the *boudoir*.

Kyra was standing by the mantel-piece, leaning on it with one elbow, in an attitude of natural grace which had just the touch of Orientalism which was perceptible in her voice.

"He has gone," said Mrs. Froyte, in her subdued fashion. "He had got as far as the gate."

"It does not matter," said Kyra. "I am sorry you sent for a doctor. Why did you? There is nothing the matter with me."

Mrs. Froyte shook her head.

"James—and I, both think that you are not well, that you

ought to have advice; you do not eat, and—and you are always tired—”

“Ah, you cannot say that!” Kyra broke in, with a faint smile. “Don’t I take long walks and drives? I can do more than most girls—”

“But you are so tired—at times. You sleep so—so heavily,” put in Mrs. Froyte, nervously.

The girl shrugged her shoulders indifferently.

“That goes for nothing. It is only because I want to escape thinking. I used to sleep like it when I was a child. I remember my father”—she paused a moment and her lips quivered, as if something had stabbed her, then she forced herself to go on—“my father being frightened. I think he said that my mother often fell into such long, deep sleeps.”

“The doctor—he seems very clever—says that you are to take a great deal of exercise, and with—with company: there is Stracey, you should let him go with you.”

The girl’s face hardened at the name, and she turned to the window. Mrs. Froyte looked up at her in a timid, deprecatory kind of way.

“And he says that you should have the society of young people.”

“Are there any here? No matter. I don’t want them. Young people? They would think me too old for them. Poor young people! Why, I am as old as Methuselah!” She turned to the woman again, with a quiet, little gesture of appeal, a bewitching, little movement, almost child-like, and yet instinct with the force of budding womanhood. “Ah, don’t trouble about me, dear! I shall be all right when—when I have learned to forget: but it is so hard to learn!”

As if to escape a continuation of the subject, she passed out of the French window and stood looking for a moment or two before her, then she sank into a deck-chair and leant back, her hands folded loosely in the lap of her soft, black dress, her eyes—the doctor had not seen them or he would have thought her beauty still more wonderful—gazing dreamily at the waning sunset.

When the doctor had left the room, the two Froytes had remained silent for a few minutes, then the father said:

“Do you think he thinks she is in any danger? Those doctors never give themselves away.”

“She may be—yes; in a way, I think she is,” replied Stracey. “He said she wanted careful watching.” There was a pause, then, with his face averted, he said, in a low voice,



as if he were speaking to himself: "She does not know about the—?"

"The will?" faltered the father.

"Of course," with suppressed impatience.

"No; I have not told her. She was so prostrated that I—I didn't think it wise."

A sneer curved the younger man's thin, cynical lips.

"Just so. It wouldn't have been wise. She is not well enough to consider business. Have you the will? You are sure there is no mistake, that it is quite valid, that it will stand?"

"Quite," replied the father. "Mr. Rolf drew it the night Jermyn died."

"And Rolf died two days afterwards?"

"Yes; a seizure."

"So, no one knows of the will but you—and me?" put in Stracey, quickly, and with an indrawing of his breath. "That is no one who knows Kyra?"

James Froyte's lips formed the word "No"; it seemed as if he were afraid to voice it.

Stracey leant against the window, glancing sideways and under his lowered lids at his father's pale face, strained by his effort at self-command.

"And by this will, if—if Kyra dies unmarried, the money comes to you?" said Stracey, in a low voice.

Mr. Froyte inclined his head and fidgetted at his lips with his fingers.

"Yes. There—there was no one else, no relation to whom he could leave it. We—we were old friends."

"Did he know that the Indian money had fallen to him, that he possessed that as well as the rest?" asked Stracey.

"Yes; he was conscious a few hours before his death, and we told him. He had expected it, and he was glad, though he was dying, that it had come—for Kyra's sake."

"And she does not know—knows nothing of the Indian fortune, of the terms of the will," Stracey murmured, as if he wished to be quite certain on the point.

"No," replied James Froyte. "I—I suppose she must be told; of course she must be told. You are poor Jermyn's executor—"

"Yes; why did he select me? He had never seen me?"

"I—I advised it. I could not act, as I was mentioned in the will!"

"Yes, yes; I forgot."

"And I—I thought it better that the executor should be—be in the family."

Stracey stole a glance at his father.

"Quite right; quite right. Why go outside it? Besides, Jermyn had no other friends, had he?"

"None, or none that I knew of. He had led a perfectly secluded life. Kyra and he were wrapped up in each other. Poor girl!"

"Yes: poor girl!" Stracey echoed the expression of sympathy, mechanically.

His eyes, narrowed to slits were fixed on the floor; he was thinking hard, and James Froyte averted his eyes as if he dreaded to know his son's thoughts.

As Kyra lay back in her chair the murmur of the voices reached her but indistinctly and did not disturb her thoughts. They were necessarily sad, but there was a vague, indefinable strain of fear in them. She was thinking of her childhood, out there in India, of her father's love, her ayah's devotion, the affection amounting almost to worship with which the servants surrounded her. She had reigned there as a little queen. Then came England—her father was English, she was proud of it, prouder still of the fact that she was by birth half, and by nature more than three parts, English. They had travelled about happy and contented in their mutual love, desiring no other companions. Then had come the terrible blow, the irreparable loss which had stricken her down. He had been snatched from her and she had been left alone without kith or kin, friendless. There were the Froytes, but her brows came together as she thought of them. Mrs. Froyte had been kind to her, in a half-timid fashion—why was she so fearful, so nervous, Kyra asked herself? Mr. Froyte was, no doubt, everything that a guardian could be: and yet—and yet—why did he watch her sideways, why did he avert his eyes when she turned to him? She, herself, was as frank and open as the day—why, he paused to think before he formed his careful speeches.

And the young son, Stracey, who had come from abroad to join the family. Her hands closed on each other as she thought of him. Such girls as Kyra are sensitive to a look, a touch, the half-tone of a voice; then something in Stracey Froyte's face, some fleeting expression hard to define, something in the low voice, in the touch of his thin, long hand were repugnant to her. Whenever he rode or walked with her, she was filled with a vague apprehension; if he sat beside her at the piano her fingers, quick and supple as an Indian's,



faltered and seemed paralysed; if she were singing there was a thickening in her throat, and the music was frozen on her lips.

She knew nothing of love or its near of kin, hate—she was just an exquisite flower of nature budding into womanhood—and she could not analyse the feeling; but she knew it was there.

She was thinking of him now—perhaps because she heard his voice, soft and low and disagreeably smooth in a man—and she made a little impatient gesture as if to thrust him from her mind, and rose to re-enter the house.

But, as she did so, she heard him speak her name. Instinctively she paused for a moment, then as instinctively was moving away; but she caught the full sentence, and its import was so terrible that she stopped and stood as if spell-bound; indeed, she was powerless to move.

"Yes; no doubt we're thinking of the same thing," he said, slowly, carefully, and with a deliberate heartlessness that chilled her. "She will marry—she is the most beautiful creature I have ever seen: she is divine in form and face. She will marry: it is inevitable. But there is only one man she must marry—me."

Kyra's arms hung limply at her side, her breath came painfully, and her glorious eyes distended as the stag's distend when he first hears the bay of the dogs.

James Froyte cleared his throat nervously and made some response, but in so low and hushed a voice that she could not hear it. Half unconsciously she slid nearer the open window of the room in which the two men were talking.

"Yes, I know. For some reason or other she does not like me," said Stracey, in a matter-of-fact tone. "She showed it at our first meeting, she has shown it every time we have been alone together. I'm sorry, of course, but—I must overcome that. I have overcome greater obstacles."

She knew the cynical curve of the thin lips that accompanied this speech.

"It will not be the first time that a girl has married a man whom she disliked at the beginning of their acquaintance. You shake your head." He laughed the soft, smooth laugh which always jarred upon the girl. "You will find that you are wrong and that I am right. I am not afraid. Give me time and opportunity."

"Time!" murmured James Froyte, huskily.

"Oh, I know," assented Stracey. He lit a cigarette, and smoked for a moment or two before he went on. "You

think I shall not have much, that we shall not be able to keep her secluded and to ourselves much longer? This fool of a doctor—it's a pity you called him in, but I suppose there was no help for it?"

"No, no!" responded James Froyte, thickly. "If—if anything had happened to her—"

"I know it would have been said that she had been neglected, perhaps that dread had been in your mind."

Kyra heard the father move suddenly, as if with fear.

—"But this doctor will insist upon her going into society; and he will not be baulked. Did you see the man's face? We shall have to deal carefully with him; and follow his advice for a time. It's a risk! By Heaven, there are few men who could look upon her without falling in love with her: there is a charm about her: is it the strain of Indian blood? We must humour him for a time, and as soon as possible take her away. Even this place is not sufficiently out of the world. We must find one still more suitable. We must have her to ourselves. Bah! you look as if I were proposing murder." He laughed contemptuously, as James Froyte started and moved so suddenly that his chair struck against the wall. "There are other and more pleasant ways. The girl knows nothing of the world; she will find that every woman is to be won in time—leave it to me. And, for Heaven's sake, don't continue to look as if you had committed—or were going to commit—a crime! There may be no need of—of strong measures. I may induce her to change her feelings towards me, I may win her love—she is not the first woman—But no matter! I mean to marry her; I meant it from the first, the moment I knew the truth. You'd better go and see if she is awake."

Kyra started as if from a spell. A shudder ran through her, and she seemed as if she were about to fall. Then suddenly a change came over her. She drew herself as erect as an arrow, she pressed her tightly clenched hands against her bosom, which heaved with the passionate indignation that flashed from the wonderful eyes, and the clear ivory of her face was flushed with the hot blood that throbbled in her veins. She was transformed from a weak and listless girl to a woman with a soul in revolt against tyranny and outrage: it was no longer the hunted stag, but a young lioness at bay: say, rather, an English girl inspired by despair to a supreme effort of resistance.

She glided to the window of the *boudoir* and sank on to the couch; her bosom was still heaving, her breath coming pain-



fully; but, as the door opened, she stilled the throbbing of her heart and turned with a smile.

"Is that you, Mr. Froyte?" she said. "Is Stracey in the house? I wonder whether he would go for a walk with me?"

Stracey was in the hall, and, as his father turned with surprise on his countenance, he smiled with an air of satisfaction and confidence.

"It's just what I was going to propose," he said, coming into the room and bending over her. "Are you rested after your sleep, Kyra?"

She repressed the shudder that threatened her, and looked up at him with a smile—the first she had ever vouchsafed him.

"Oh, yes! And I am dying for a walk. Give me five minutes—only five minutes."

As she went by them and out of the room, Stracey put up his hand and smilingly stroked his moustache.

CHAPTER II.

ONE evening, three weeks later, a young fellow alighted from a dog-cart at Holmby Hall. It is one of the seats of the great Ashleigh family, and by no means the least important. The butler received him with stately but smiling dignity, handed his modest portmanteau to a servant, and, in response to the young man's genial, "Well, Williams: all right, I hope?" responded with respectful amiability:

"Thank you kindly, Mr. Lance. I hope I see you the same?"

"Fit as a fiddle, thanks, Williams," said Lance le Breton, in the frank and light-hearted way which caused most persons to treat him as a boy, though he had reached manhood two or three years since. "The earl and all of them well, I hope?"

"His lordship is pretty well, sir, barring a touch of the gout—he is in his room at present. Lord Arthur is about as usual, sir; he's in his room, too. Lady May is quite well. Her ladyship was expecting you by the earlier train; she is about the grounds somewhere, I think, sir."

Lance le Breton nodded.

"I lost the other train by a minute." He generally lost his train, and usually by more than a minute. "I'll go straight to my room; there is only just time to dress, isn't there?"

"Yes, sir—the blue room," said the butler, glancing at the

clock. "Can I send anything up to you, Mr. Lance; a glass of sherry?"

Lance declined, with a laugh.

"No, thanks, Williams; I'm as hungry as a hunter already."

A footman took his coat and hat, and looked after him admiringly, as he went up the great staircase with a light step, two stairs at a time.

"One of the best, Mr. Lance is, ain't he, Mr. Williams?" he said; and Williams nodded, with grave and emphatic assent.

"One of *the* best, Joseph!"

Lance had reached the head of the corridor which ran round the hall, when a door was flung open and a young girl rushed out.

She was sixteen; a pretty girl with bonny hair and eyes and a mouth that was stretched with an eager smile of welcome.

"Is that you, Lance!" she cried. "At last! Of course you lost your train! And of course I was idiot enough to think you'd catch it, and went down to meet you."

"Hallo, May!" he cried, in response, catching her by both hands and looking at her affectionately and with a faint surprise in his frank, laughing eyes. "By George, how you've grown! And all in—what is it—five, six months! Why, you're almost big enough to put your hair up and let your—ahem!—skirts down!"

Lady May laughed and blushed as she wrung his strong hands and looked into his face with girlish admiration and affection.

"Yes, I am grown, aren't I? I knew you'd say that the first moment you saw me. How well you're looking, Lance! Oh, I'm so glad you've come! There's been no one here, and it's been as dull as ditch-water."

"Thank you very much," he retorted. "Yes, I've come, May. I couldn't resist the temptation of seeing the old place—and you, May, once more, for the last time—perhaps for years."

"Then you're going away, Lance?" she said, with a sigh and a warmer pressure of his hands.

He nodded.

"Yes; my bark is on the shore, May, dear," he assented. "I've joined that Border Brigade, you know—I'll tell you all about it presently—and we may get our marching orders



any day. Indeed, I had the deuce's own trouble to obtain leave."

"I'm sorry!" she said, with sisterly regret.

He shrugged his shoulders and smiled down at her; for, though she had grown, he stood above her, for he was tall and sinewy and lithe as is the modern, young man who cultivates his muscles and keeps in training.

"There was no help for it, May. When a chap hasn't any money—or brains—there's nothing for it but the colonies or the service. I got ploughed for Sandhurst, as you know; so there was only the Border Brigade. It's a rough billet; but it will do well enough, and I'm pretty certain it's as good as I deserve. But never mind me. Tell me about yourself. Keep up your cold baths and your swimming? Use those Indian clubs I gave you—I hope you do!—and stick to your riding and your hockey!"

The girl nodded two or three times eagerly as she replied, laughingly:

"Yes, Lance! Don't you see how much bigger I am round the chest? And I walk as much as Miss Barlow will let me. Poor, old dear! she has a hankering suspicion that cold baths, Indian clubs, and hockey are unlady-like; and I can't quite convince her that they're not, that it's the thing for women to be 'strong as well as wise,' though I quote you every time, Lance!"

She nodded, with a mischievous twinkle in her bright, brown eyes.

"That isn't very wise, anyway, May," he said, with a rueful smile. "I'm afraid Miss Barlow regards me as everything but a suitable mentor and friend. But, never mind, you stick to it, and you'll grow up a healthy, young woman and a model to your sex, my child—"

"I'm not your child; I wish I were, Lance," she said, smiling up at him.

He put his arm round her and gave her a brotherly kiss on her white, level brow, softly brushing the hair back to make room.

"I wish you were—or my sister, May! But never mind, we're cousins, aren't we?"

"Yes; that's something," she said, with a little sigh. "You haven't seen father yet—nor Arthur, I suppose? Father's not very well, and you'll find him rather short and grumpy; but he'll really be glad to see you. As to Arthur"—she shrugged her shoulders and raised her brows—"he's got a new complaint—neurasthania or something of the sort—"

一、關於我國經濟建設的方針
（一）發展生產，繁榮經濟
（二）公私兼顧，勞資兩利
（三）統籌兼顧，適當安排
（四）自力更生，土洋並舉
（五）發展農業，增加糧食
（六）發展工業，增加產量
（七）發展交通，改善運輸
（八）發展貿易，擴大交流
（九）發展教育，提高文化
（十）發展衛生，保障健康
（十一）發展體育，增強體質
（十二）發展藝術，豐富生活
（十三）發展科學，促進進步
（十四）發展技術，提高質量
（十五）發展管理，提高效率
（十六）發展勞動，增加就業
（十七）發展消費，改善生活
（十八）發展節約，減少浪費
（十九）發展愛國，增強團結
（二十）發展和平，促進合作



don't know what things are coming to! Fancy a Le Breton joining a volunteer corps, or whatever it is!"

The young fellow laughed.

"It's not quite so bad as that," he said, cheerfully. "And yet it isn't much different, after all. But the brigade has seen some service, and has done some fairish work; and I'm hoping, if we have a scrimmage, as we probably shall—"

"I daresay, I daresay!" interrupted his lordship, impatiently. "We've always got some d—n foolish little war on that costs us twice as much as it's worth; and if you don't get a bullet through you or knocked on the head— Oh, there you are!" he broke off, turning on his stick to glance at his eldest son, Lord Beechley, an elderly-young man with a long, pale face and a thin nose, who entered with a listless and dragging gait. "Thought you were never coming. You'll spoil the soup, for certain."

Arthur glanced at his father, as if he scarcely heard him, said nothing in response, and only seemed to be conscious of Lance's presence when he had got close up to him.

"Ah, Lance! how are you?" he said, without the slightest assumption of interest. "Heard you were coming. Had a pleasant journey? But of course you haven't. The carriages on this line are not fit for a dog to travel in: one mass of draughts. The last time I came down I caught a cold that clung to me for weeks—weeks; in fact, I trace this awful attack of neurasthania to the horrors of that journey. By the way, have you heard anything about this new electric treatment? I'm giving it a trial—is one of those windows open? I'm sure I can feel a chill—and I'm inclined to think that it's doing me good. But I will not express an opinion yet. I said to the doctor: 'I will give it a fair trial—'"

"Dinner is served, my lord," said Williams, who knew that if he waited until Lord Beechley had finished, more than the soup would be spoiled.

"Then, for Heaven's sake, let us go in!" exclaimed the earl, pettishly.

The three men dined alone. A certain Lady Adderley, a connection of the family, was coming to play the part of hostess at the ball. She did not live at the Hall—for the simple reason that she and the earl could not possibly "get on together" for long under one roof—but resided at a kind of dower-house on a distant part of the estate. It was not a cheerful meal, but then Lance did not expect it, and consequently was not disappointed nor even depressed—it took a great deal to depress Lance—and he ate his dinner with

healthy enjoyment and listened with a smile to his uncle's grumblings and his cousin's hypochondriacal confidences. Neither of his noble kinsmen referred to himself or his own affairs—is anything more productive of selfishness than gout and hysteria?—but Lance didn't mind, and he turned up smiling in the drawing-room, where May was waiting for him with a demure and “proper” countenance.

“Hallo, not in bed, miss?” grunted the earl; and her brother eyed her sadly, and, shaking his head, remarked, with a hollow cough, that late hours sowed the seeds of the worst diseases in young people.

May turned with a pout to Lance, and they went into a corner, out of sight.

“How nice you look,” he said. “It is a pity you can't take a hand to-night. Tell me who's coming.”

“Oh, everybody,” she said. “All the county people who are here, and the principal persons in the place; doctors and lawyers and—and so on, you know. Aunt Adderley says that it is a regular ‘*olla podrida*’—that means a stew of all kinds of things, doesn't it. I'm going to draw the curtain of the ante-room and dance all the waltzes to myself. I've got my dancing-shoes on, see? But, oh, Lance, dear, I've been thinking of your going away, and it makes me so sad! When shall I see you again? Not for ever so long, I suppose?”

“I don't know,” he replied. “I rather think it's a long and toughish job we're on—but I've not gone yet, I may have some days, a week or two—can't tell—and you and I will spend it together. Here's Aunt Adderley. Now, I'll bet you what you like, she won't remember me. I can tell by the way she's putting up those glasses of hers.”

“I must run away before she can speak to me; she's worse than Miss Barlow!” said May, in a whisper; and, pressing Lance's arm, she slid through the convenient door-way.

The guests streamed in soon afterwards, and the dance commenced. It was a bit of luck for Lance, for he was a dancing man, and he fell to work in a business-like way, getting his partners.

There were many old friends of the family present, and he was rapidly filling his card, but he left a dance or two for eventualities.

After the first waltz he made an opportunity of going into the ante-room, and found May concealed behind a tall vase.

“Here I am!” she whispered. “Oh, you lucky boy! And how well you dance, Lance! How would you like to be a big,



strong girl who simply adores waltzing, and is kept out of it all because she isn't two years older?"

"Never mind!" he whispered, soothingly and sympathetically. "Look here, by George! I'll stay here for the next waltz, and dance it with you. I've kept a space or two. Just have a peep—just one!"

He drew the curtain aside and looked into the ball-room with her.

"Pretty crowded, isn't it? As you said, everybody is here. I don't know half the people, and— By George, May—look! Who is that?" he broke off, with something like a catch in his breath.

Lady May looked up at his eyes to see the direction they were taking, then gripped his arm as she whispered, eagerly:

"You mean *her*! The girl in the black lace dress—the girl with the pale ivory face and dark eyes! I know! I don't wonder at your being struck! The first time I saw her—she was riding across the moor—she took my breath away just as she took yours. Isn't she l-o-v-e-l-y, Lance; isn't she a dream? And—look at her face!—isn't there something—something *thrilling* in it, something that makes you think of—of—oh, I don't know, I can't explain!"

A strange and novel gravity sat on Lance's usually careless and light-hearted face. He was silent for a moment, as if he too were trying to express to himself the effect the girl's face had upon him.

"What is her name—who is she?" he asked, in a low voice.

"She is a Miss Jermyn. She is an orphan—her father died a little while ago. She is staying with her guardian at the Elms—you know the house, Lance? Doctor Graham told me about her—he told me her name—such a strange one—Kyra. He says that she has Indian blood—"

"No, no, she is English," said Lance, swiftly. "And yet— Doctor Graham, I saw him just now. May, I—I want to speak to her—to dance. I'll come back."

"Yes—go, and come back and tell me—"

He had gone before she could finish the sentence.

Half-way across the room he pulled up with a sense of reluctance to yielding to the emotion which the face had wrought in him. It was so sudden, so painful that the young man resented it. But at that moment Kyra turned from speaking to the timid-looking woman at her side and glanced in his direction.

Their eyes met; something seemed to grip Lance by the heart, and he was almost conscious of catching his breath—

as Romeo may have caught his when first his eyes fell upon his Juliet at that ball in far Verona—and he walked towards her.

CHAPTER III.

It was as if the beautiful, sad eyes were drawing Lance towards them; as if something were tugging at his heart's strings, and it was not until he had got within a few yards of Kyra that he remembered that he had not been introduced to her.

He pulled up, for the second time, and went in search of Doctor Graham.

"Eh? Introduce you? Certainly," he said, promptly. "I'm glad you have asked me. Miss Jermyn has refused to dance, but I want her to do so. She is a patient of mine—"

"A patient!" echoed Lance, incredulously. "Why, she looks in the most perfect health."

"So she is, in a sense. Well, let's say I want to keep her so. My dear Mr. le Breton, if you people would only consult a doctor when you are in health you'd never be ill. But *you* don't trouble a doctor much!" he said, glancing at the sinewy figure and handsome face.

They had reached Kyra by this time. Lance's heart was beating fast, and in a way that astonished and puzzled him; but she raised her eyes and regarded him calmly, with the splendid calmness of an innocent girl.

"Let me introduce my friend, Mr. le Breton, Lord Ashleigh's nephew," said Doctor Graham. "He has come to ask for a dance."

"I am not dancing," said Kyra, in a low, sweet voice that thrilled Lance afresh.

"Oh, but I think you should!" said Doctor Graham, with the professional mixture of coaxing and command. "What does one come to a ball for?"

"I came because you wished it," she said, simply, her dark eyes resting on his with womanly simplicity.

"Then dance because I wish it," he responded.

She hesitated for a moment longer, then she rose and put her arm in Lance's. He could not speak; for the first time in his life he was tongue-tied; the touch of her white, perfectly moulded arm acted like a spell, and it was a moment or two before he slipped his arm round her waist and began to dance.

He was not surprised to find that she danced divinely. She



made the waltz the poetry of motion; and so light was she that it seemed to Lance that he was holding a thing of air in his arms. They floated round the large room thrice, but her breath was as even and regular as when they began, and when he stopped—for he wanted to speak to her, to hear her speak—her cheek was not flushed, her eyes as calm and serene as they had been when she had first turned them to his.

"The room is rather crowded; shall we sit down for a moment? Here is the conservatory."

He led her into it and she opened her fan and fanned herself with an unconscious grace that matched all her movements; a grace that struck Lance as beyond the English form, as having something Oriental in it.

"You have not been long in Ashleigh, Miss Jermyn?" he said, seating himself beside her and bending forward with a kind of suppressed eagerness.

"Only a little while," she replied.

"I hope you like it, that you are going to remain?" he said, trying to speak in a tone of ordinary politeness, but feeling as if so much depended on her answer.

"Yes; it is very beautiful. But I do not know." A touch of colour came to her face, he heard her breath quicken, and saw a strange expression in the lovely eyes: surely it could not be fear? "It depends upon my guardian."

"Mr. Froyte? I know he has taken the Elms. I hope you are not sorry that you have danced?"

"No," she said. "I am fond of it. I used to dance with the ayah and the girls in India; they taught me."

"They dance well there," he said, significantly. "And you come from India? I envy you. My cousin, Lady May, has seen you out riding. She is a dear, little girl—would you let her call on you, Miss Jermyn? She would be very glad; in fact—you will not be offended?—she has taken a girlish fancy to you."

"To me?" she said, with faint surprise. "That is strange. Yes, I shall be glad to see her, if they—yes, I shall be glad. I have not seen anyone."

"Thank you," he murmured, quite gratefully. "I will tell her. You have not been well, Miss Jermyn, not able to see many visitors?"

She made a movement with her fan.

"I am quite well," she said, simply.

"Shall we dance again?" he asked.

She rose, and they went back to the ball-room. The spell was strengthening its hold on Lance; her voice, the few com-

monplace words she had spoken repeated themselves in his ears, the music of her voice seemed to sing in his heart. The perfect waltz came to an end in a long, soft strain, and, with a sigh of regret, he felt her stop.

"May I keep you until your next partner claims you?" he said. "We will go back to the conservatory; it is cooler there. Shall I get you an ice—anything? No? Not yet?"

They went back to the same seat, and Lance fell into the same attitude. He wanted to talk to her, but he could not find anything to say; the usual trite, commonplace remarks about the music, the room, the dresses, seemed to him unworthy of this exquisite creature with the loveliness of a girl and the aloofness of a goddess. She leant back, her eyes fixed dreamily on the flowers and pictures, her fan moving with a slow and rhythmical movement; she appeared to have almost forgotten his presence. Then suddenly she turned her eyes upon him.

"What is your name?" she asked. "I did not hear it."

"Le Breton—Lance le Breton," he replied.

She repeated the name, and, for the first time, it sounded like music in the owner's ears.

"That is not English?"

"No; Norman. But 'we're English, you know,' all right," he said. "That is, we've been here since the famous, or infamous, William."

"And you are a noble—Lord Ashleigh's nephew?"

She put the question not lightly, as the ordinary girl in society would have put it—if she would have put it at all—but gravely, as if she were interested in the fact, not in him.

"Oh, no; I'm only a plain commoner; and there's not much chance of my becoming anything else: there are several between me and the title."

"Ah, yes, I see," she said. "I am strange to orders of ranks. I have not been in England long. Do you live here?"

In another person, at another time, Lance would have been much amused, if not astonished, at this series of questions; but in her, and now, it seemed quite natural.

"Oh, no; I'm only down on a short visit. I live in poky rooms in London. I'm poor, you see." He was going to add: "So poor that I have taken a commission in the Border Brigade;" but something held the statement back.

She was silent for a moment; then, in the same, calm way, a way that would have appeared cold and indifferent but for the voice that thrilled him by its sweetness, she said:



"Are you married?"

Lance held his breath for a moment, then he burst out with:

"Good Lord, no!—I beg your pardon! The question took me by surprise. I'm poor, you know. No good to marry."

She was not confused; her eyes dwelt upon him with deep contemplation in their liquid depths.

"I see. I see, too, that I ought not to have asked—"

"No, no!" he broke in. "It was very kind of you—I mean"—he faltered, to his own amazement, for Lance was not given to faltering in his speech with women, or men, either, for that matter—"that it is good of you to take any interest—that I should like to tell you everything about myself, that I— Miss Jermyn, do you think you could permit me to call with May? I should be very glad, grateful—"

He stopped abruptly, for he felt her eyes upon him, as if she were studying him, not as a girl, young and impressionable, covertly studies a young and handsome man, but with a calm, critical regard that momentarily checked him—it was so cold, so aloof.

He waited breathlessly for her answer. Her lips opened, but she checked the words, and Lance saw a singular expression stealing swiftly over her face and her eyes. He looked up. A tall, dark man, with thin lips, was approaching them.

"No," she said, almost inaudibly, as the man came up.

"Are you engaged for this dance, Kyra?" he asked; and at the sound of his voice, soft and low, and the look in his eyes as they passed in a furtive way from the girl to Lance, Lance detested him.

"No," she said, with a smile, the first Lance had seen. "Shall we dance it?"

Then, as she rose, she said:

"This is Mr. Stracey Froyte, Mr. le Breton."

The two men exchanged the usual curt bow, and Stracey took her away. Lance stood for a moment looking after her, then he drew a long breath and passed his hand over his forehead. He felt bewildered, confused; he was simply dazed by the girl's extraordinary beauty, the charm of her grace, and, more still, by the questions she had put to him in so strange a manner. He went to the ante-room, where he had left May, and she pounced out at him from behind the curtains.

"Oh, Lance, you danced with her! Well?"

"Well?" he replied, stupidly.

"Well, what is she like? Is she nice, really nice—? Why, what is the matter with you? You look as if you'd seen a ghost. Why do you stare at me as if—as if you were struck silly?"

He forced a smile.

"Oh, she's all right," he said, with poorly feigned indifference. "Oh, yes, she's very nice. You'll like her."

"I? I don't know her."

"Oh, but you'll call," he said, quickly. "I told her you would; and you will, to please—I mean, it would be a kindness. She doesn't know anyone—she's been ill, don't you see? I'd call to-morrow, if I were you. You'll get on famously. Why, she can't be very much older than you; she's only a girl, for all her— Here, May, we'll dance this waltz you promised me," he broke off, shrinking from her widely opened eyes; and he caught hold of her.

"Not quite so fast, Lance. You *are* strange. You seem quite flurried about something. Is it Miss Jermyn?—oh, what a lovely waltz!—and I'm to call? I wonder whether Miss Barlow will let me?"

"Yes, yes; it's all right. They're new, you know—and the election—"

"Oh, very well. I shall like it, for I feel as if I should like her. Are you going to dance with her again, Lance?"

"I don't know," he said, absently. "I mean to try. She dances like—like a zephyr."

"Never danced with one," said May. "A man's good enough for me. There! it's over!" she sighed presently. "I'm going to get an ice and eat it all by myself. Go and ask Miss Jermyn again, and come back and tell me all about her— Oh, here's Aunt Adderley coming!"

When she had fitted away, Lance sank into a seat and tried to think; tried, indeed, to argue himself out of the extraordinary state of mind into which he had fallen; but he could not rest, and he started up and looked through the curtains. Kyra was sitting beside the timid-looking woman again—he guessed it was her guardian's wife—and he threaded his way through the crowd and went up to her.

"May I have another dance, Miss Jermyn?" he asked, in as matter-of-fact tone as he could manage, while the whispered "No!" was still ringing in his ears.

She looked over his head as if she had forgotten him, and said coldly:

"No, thank you. I am tired, and shall not dance again."

Lance bowed and walked away, feeling as if he had been



suddenly plunged into an ice-bath. He went to the farther end of the room and leant against a pillar by the entrance. He, too, felt "tired;" he would not dance again if he could help it. She had refused to let him call, she had refused to dance with him. Why? What had he said or done to offend her? He racked his brains—not very acute ones, be it admitted—in vain. Was it because he was not married? Was it his way of telling her? Was it something about him to which she had taken a dislike? Yes, that must be it. Girls were quick to take fancies or to be repelled. She did not like him. Of course, that would account for her strange coldness and aloofness, her double refusal to have anything to do with him.

The conviction made him unhappy, strangely, foolishly unhappy; for, great heavens! he had only just seen her, had danced but one dance with her, exchanged only half a dozen sentences! And yet he felt that he would give—well, all that he had not got—to have won her liking, her favour.

With a sigh of regret and impatience, he was moving away when he saw her coming down the room beside Mrs. Froyte. He stopped near the entrance under the pretence of consulting his programme, and as she passed, bowed to her. She gave him the slightest inclination of the head; but as she was abreast of him she dropped her fan softly. Lance sprang forward and picked it up; Mrs. Froyte had passed on, Kyra looked at her swiftly, then, as she took the fan, she said in a low voice:

"In the lane by the church, to-morrow at six."

The blood rushed to Lance's face; he could not speak, but his eyes answered for him and she passed on as calm as ever, without the shadow of a blush on her lovely face.

CHAPTER IV.

At four o'clock the next day Kyra was pacing up and down the terrace under the verandah with a light step, and a brightness in her eyes which had long been absent from them. The cause was not far to seek: Stracey and his father had gone to London on business and would not return until late in the evening; and the sense of freedom produced by their absence was thrilling through her.

A few weeks ago they would not have risked leaving her, but Stracey had been thrown off his guard by the change in her manner towards him. She loathed herself for every smile she bestowed upon him, though she strove to stifle her con-

science, which revolted at the deceit she was practising, by the thought that she, a girl, helpless and alone, was acting in the defence of her liberty.

Just within the drawing-room, Mrs. Froyte was arranging some flowers, now and again turning her head to covertly watch the slim, graceful figure as it passed the window, and wondering why the girl looked so bright and cheerful.

"The dance last night did you good, Kyra," she said, coming out, but standing by the door. "Doctor Graham was right."

"Yes," she said. "I enjoyed it; it is so long since I danced; and yet I did not want to go."

"You must have more society, as Doctor Graham says. We must have a dinner-party," began Mrs. Froyte; then suddenly she broke off nervously. "There is a young lady coming in at the gate. She cannot be coming here! And James not at home!"

Her hands closed tightly over the flowers she held and she went pale.

"It is all right," Kyra said, soothingly. "I think I know who it is. It is someone from the Hall. Why are you so—frightened?"

"I—I am nervous, I am always afraid—I mean shy of visitors. Oh, yes, she is coming here!"

Kyra went to the verandah steps, and May, after a minute's hesitation, turned and came towards her.

"You are Miss Jermyn, I know," she said, and the frank voice and smile of the girl were so like Mr. le Breton's that Kyra almost started. "I am May Beechley: you know you said I might call."

Kyra held out her hand and May's strong one closed round it with anything but the fashionable, apathetic greeting.

"Yes, I am very glad to see you," said Kyra, her eyes dwelling upon May's girlish face, as if she were trying to read her character. "Will you come inside, or shall we sit here?"

"Oh, let us sit here," May responded, promptly. "It is too fine to keep in-doors. I love the open air in any weather, but especially on such a jolly day as this, don't you? What a deliciously easy chair!" she exclaimed, with a sigh of contentment, as she tossed her hair back and snuggled into the chair. "It's a treat for me, for Miss Barlow doesn't like me to sit in anything but one of those terrible upright things; she says it is bad for my back—as if anything was the matter with my back! But that's where governesses are so silly. I am so



glad you are at home! What a beautiful view you get from here; it is better than ours from the Hall. I hope you enjoyed the dance last night! I saw you. I was behind a curtain in one of the ante-rooms. What a lovely frock you wore! It was the prettiest in the room, I thought, and so did Lance—that's my cousin, Mr. le Breton: you danced with him, you know."

"Yes, I remember," said Kyra. "I am glad you liked my dress: it was of Indian stuff."

May looked up at her with shy admiration.

"You were beautiful—oh, I mean the dress. You won't be offended, will you? I ought not to have said it," she added, penitently.

Kyra smiled at her.

"Is anyone offended by being told that they are not plain?" she said, in her low, sweet voice.

"You're not! Well, then, I'll risk it, and say that you have the loveliest voice, too. There! Now, Miss Jermyn, you know why I get into such scrapes with Miss Barlow for blurting out what's on my mind! She says that the first thing a lady should learn is 'a proper reserve.' As if everybody isn't reserved and self-contained enough already! But I beg your pardon, if I've been rude."

"If you have, it is a very charming rudeness," said Kyra; "and you may repeat it whenever you like."

"Now, that's nice of you!" said May, flushing with pleasure. "I felt I should like you, now I'm certain of it! Most people would have talked about being made vain, and pretended to be shocked, and aired their modesty. As if anyone didn't know when they were good-looking! That's very bad grammar, I'm afraid; but you know what I mean."

"Perfectly," said Kyra, her warm heart, craving for companionship, going out lovingly to this frank, healthy English girl sitting with her long, black legs crossed in graceful ease, and her innocent eyes beaming with friendliness that only wanted encouragement to grow into affection.

"And now you must tell me about yourself," said May. "I mean, how you like Ashleigh, and how you pass the time. I know you ride, because I have seen you: and, oh, I did want so much to know you! Do you play and sing?—but I'm sure you do." She laughed and nodded. "Lance said you could not help it, with such a face and speaking voice."

Kyra did not blush, but still smiled placidly at the outspoken girl.

"Yes, I play and sing a little."

"I love music. You will let me hear you, won't you?" said May, eagerly.

"Presently; if you wish it, Lady May. We will have some tea first. Mrs. Froyte was here just now."

As she spoke, Mrs. Froyte, pale with nervousness, came out, and Kyra introduced them. Mrs. Froyte could scarcely speak; and, murmuring that she would not interrupt them and would send out the tea, faded away like a timid ghost.

"Oh, cake, please!" exclaimed May, when the tea had appeared. "I get it so seldom. Miss Barlow says that it is bad for the teeth. Did you ever notice, Miss Jermyn, that everything nice is bad for some part or other of you? One almost wonders why Providence sent the nice things. This is delicious cake: and the tea, too—there, again! I'm not allowed to have mine strong: bad for the nerves—as if I'd got any nerves! I wish you'd talk to Miss Barlow when you see her, and try and convince her that I'm not an invalid— But, oh, that reminds me! You have not been well; Doctor Graham is attending you. And yet, as Lance said, you seem in such perfect health."

"I am," said Kyra. "Perhaps it is because I am always pale that I am sometimes thought to be ill. But that is my Indian blood."

"Are you really—Indian? How—how glorious!"

Kyra smiled at her enthusiasm.

"My mother was partly Brahmin," she said, softly.

"No!" said May, with bated breath. "That accounts for the—the difference between you and the other girls one knows." Her frank eyes roamed over Kyra's white Indian muslin with its black Oriental silk sash. "That is Indian, isn't it? How soft and delicate it is! It drapes round you like a cloud. I've never seen anything like it. One cannot buy it, I suppose?"

"Not in England, I think. My father"—her voice shook for a moment—"brought it with him from some place beyond the hills. I have a piece left, if you like, if you will let me give it you."

May's pretty face flushed with delight.

"Of course I ought to say 'no,' with my lips pursed up, like this! But I won't; in fact, I couldn't if I tried. Oh, yes, and thank you—thank you very much."

"No, it is I who should thank you," said Kyra, with a sweet simplicity as girlish as May herself.

"And perhaps you'll see something of mine that you fancy



and let me exchange: you will, will you not? You won't be stiff and 'proper?'"

"No, I promise not to be," said Kyra. "And what else shall I tell you before you tell me something of yourself?"

"Oh, I don't know," said May, gazing at her as if she were fascinated, as indeed she was; for the wonderful charm of Kyra's presence—a charm almost magical—worked as powerfully and irresistibly on woman as on man. "It seems to me as if I'd known you for years: and we have only been talking half an hour! Have you any friends here, Miss Jermyn?"

Kyra shook her head.

"No," she said, quietly. "Only my guardian and his family."

"That was Mrs. Froyte's son—the dark, thin man I saw with you last night?"

"Yes," said Kyra, and the slightest of shadows dimmed the lovely eyes. "I have no other friends."

"Oh, but you've me now!" May broke in, eagerly. "I can't tell you how much I like you already: and I hope you will try and like me a little."

"I shall not have to try very hard, Lady May," said Kyra, smiling; but there was something in her eyes which made May's face flush and drew her hand to Kyra's.

"How good of you! And I'm only a great, hulking girl in the school-room, and you—but I mustn't say it, though you have forgiven me. And now, what can I tell you about myself? You've seen my father and Arthur—Edward's in London; he's reading for the bar. He's the clever one, the only clever one in the family. He's going into Parliament—but you know?"

"No," said Kyra. "My guardian—we are all strangers here, remember; and we don't talk—I mean— But please go on."

"Well, there's Aunt Adderley"—one is ashamed to say that Lady May made a grimace—"I'm afraid you won't care for her: she's worse than Miss Barlow. And there's Lance—you know him."

Kyra inclined her head. For the first time her eyes did not meet the girl's eager ones, but gazed straight before her with a curious expression of reserve, of pre-occupation.

"You'll like him: you did, didn't you? He's the best of the bunch. Dear, old Lance! He's like a brother to me; in fact, I'm afraid—I know you'll be shocked!—I'm afraid I like him, in a certain way, better than the others. You see, we

were little kids together—the others are older than I am, Arthur ever so much—and we played together; and Lance was always so kind to me, so—so jolly. Oh, he's the best and dearest fellow in the world! Everybody's fond of Lance. Why, even the servants—and you know what servants are—fly, actually *fly*, to do anything for him. And he's such a sportsman—I love sport, don't you?—oh, I wish I were a man like Lance!" She heaved a sigh and struck her knee with wistful impatience. "There's nothing he isn't good at; he'll ride *anything*, and he's the best shot I know; and he won the 'Varsity Cup—athletics, you know—and he pulled stroke in the winning boat of his year, and—and you *can't* tire him: I've tried, and I'm as strong as an Exmoor pony; and you know how he can dance—oh, I had such a splendid one with him in the ante-room—and he's—he's so generous—not like Edward—and he's *never* ill like poor Arthur; and he's so good natured, he'll take any amount of trouble to do the slightest little thing for you; and then he's so good-looking—don't you think so? There I am again! Now, that really was 'bad form.' But you don't look shocked, Miss Jermyn!"

"I was too busy to think how fortunate Mr. le Breton was to have so sweet and enthusiastic a trumpeter," said Kyra, coming back suddenly from her reverie.

"Oh, well," with a breath of relief, "you can't say too much in dear, old Lance's favour. Poor boy!"

"Why do you pity him?" asked Kyra.

"Oh, well, because he is so poor! It seems such a shame that Arthur and Edward and the rest of us should have so much money, and Lance none at all. And he's not clever—how glad I am, for my sake!—and, as he can't pass any of the wretched exams everyone has to go in for to get anything, he is obliged to join the Border Brigade."

Kyra looked at her questioningly.

"You know? They're fighting out on the frontier. I don't know how Lance got his commission; Arthur said that it was 'influence'—I don't understand, do you? And the worst of it is he may have to join any day. I shall break my heart when he goes! I think he's sorry to go, that he feels it. He has been so pale and—and strange to-day."

Kyra's eyes had gone back to the distant view, and the pre-occupied expression had fallen on them again, like a veil. Her hands, clasped in her lap, closed over each other tightly.

"Of course Lance could have some of our money, but he is too proud! He's such a—a man! That's why I like him so! I suppose I must go now? Oh, dear, it seems as if I had



only been here a few minutes. But you will come and see me—you will let us be friends. Do, please, Miss Jermyn!"

Kyra was silent for a moment, then she said in a low voice:

"Perhaps; oh, yes, I wish to—but my guardian"—she checked herself as May stared at her with astonishment. "But I shall come if I can; and if I do not, you will understand, and come to me. Ah, if you knew how I longed for a friend, one girl-friend!"

Her voice, the wistful sadness of the dark eyes thrilled May. She rose and stretched out her hands.

"Then take me for your friend, dear!" she pleaded.

Kyra's hands clasped the girl's and they looked into each other's eyes; and tears came into May's; why, she knew not.

"But you are to play and sing to me! I'll wait for that and risk it. Ah, do!"

They went into the *boudoir*—May slipped her arm round Kyra's slim waist—and Kyra sat down at once and sang. It was a song in Hindoostani: a hill-mother's lullaby to her babe; and May held her breath: she had never heard such singing! So sweet, so musical, so entrancing.

"Oh!" she gasped. "That just completes it! I feel as if I were under a spell! Oh, you *must* come to me, and you must sing! Oh, if Lance could only hear you! He's so fond of music, poor boy! Once more, *once* more! Does Mr. Froyte—young Mr. Froyte—sing? Do you sing duets with him?"

Kyra was touching the keys softly, and her hands stopped suddenly. May could not see the tightening of the lips, the flash of the wonderful eyes. A clock chimed the half hour—half-past five! She started and rose.

"Not again, to-day," she said, in an absent-minded tone.

May held out her hand.

"No; it is too much to ask. Good-bye, dear, *dear* Miss Jermyn. Oh, *may* I?"

Blushing like an English rose, she put her arms round Kyra's neck and drew her down and kissed her; then she ran from the room as if ashamed, but paused at the steps, still blushing, and waved her hand.

"Which way are you going?" asked Kyra, in a low voice.

"By the high road, dear Miss Jermyn. I've to call at the shops."

Kyra nodded and waved her hand. Then she drew a long breath, glanced at the clock, and went up to her own room. Several times, as she put on her out-door things, she paused

and gazed, with knitted brows, at her reflection in the glass. Once a crimson blush stained her face and her eyes dropped and her bosom heaved as if with the weight of a secret shame; once she flung her hands before her face, as if to shut out some thought, some vision, but after awhile her eyes grew steadier; some purpose shone in them and caused the lips to close tightly. The expression on the beautiful face was one of intense resolution, resolution born of infinite need, of infinite despair.

As she came down the stairs, Mrs. Froyte emerged, in her characteristic fashion, from one of the rooms.

"Going out, Kyra?" she said, fearfully.

"Yes; I am going to walk in the garden. You do not mind?"

"No, no—oh, no! It will do you good," responded Mrs. Froyte. "Who was that young lady?" she asked, nervously.

"Lady May, from the Hall," said Kyra. "I will tell you about her when I come in."

She went into the garden and strolled up and down for a few minutes, until Mrs. Froyte had left the window, from which Kyra knew she was watching her; then she slipped behind the laurels and out of the gate, and walked slowly towards the church.

Lance had started half an hour before. He had been in a fever of wonder and curiosity and something even less definable.

The whispered words had reached his ears and thrilled him with their import. He had not slept all night—no wonder he was pale, as May had said—but had tossed to and fro, repeating her words, asking himself what they meant. She—*she*, the sweetest, purest, most queenly of girls!—had asked him, a stranger, a man whom she had met for the first time that night to meet her secretly—yes, *secretly*—for she had planned the dropping of her fan, had whispered the request—or was it a command?—to meet her that very next day!

Was she a coquette? His heart rose indignantly at the suggestion. She, whose pure soul looked clearly out of the clear eyes as through a window, a coquette! No; there had been no blush, no simper. And yet, there it was: she had asked him to meet her! And her strange question: was he married?

The fact strove with the natural construction which any man, not necessarily a man of the world, but any man, would put upon it. But all the time he knew, in his innermost soul,



that, strange, wonderful as her act was, it was not that of a shameless coquette and flirt.

He rose, haggard with his wrestling with the problem, and, as soon as he could do so, took his rod and went down to the stream: not to fish, but to lie full length and ponder and ponder. Her face and voice haunted him, as he repeated her words a thousand times, reading a fresh meaning into them each time he repeated them: and, as he recalled her divine beauty, the sad light in her eyes, the music of her voice, he felt as if he were going mad with an indefinable longing for the hours to pass, that he might meet her and learn the secret of the mystery.

Was she in any trouble? No; that was too far-fetched an idea. With a gesture of helplessness to solve the mystery, he strode back to the Hall. All through luncheon he talked with the rest, talked of the ball and the guests, of Edward's election chances; but he could not eat; and the glass of wine he took only made him feel more feverish. He shut himself up in his room, pacing up and down, thinking, thinking, chasing one suggestion after another; then, at half-past five, he started for the meeting-place.

It was well chosen. Few used the little lane, excepting on Sundays, and on week-days two persons could meet and talk there unobserved.

He watched the clock as the hands went round slowly—Heaven, how slowly!—then, when it came to six, and the hour struck, a wave of disappointment swept over him.

She was not there: she was not coming! It—it was a trick—God knew why she had played with him, what her object was! But it was only a trick!

Then suddenly his heart bounded, then seemed to stop: she was coming towards him, her face downcast, her step slow and bewitchingly graceful.

He strode towards her; she heard him and raised her head and met his eyes, burning in his pale face, with a sad, steady regard.

"You have come!" he breathed.

"Yes," she said, as if surprised at the doubt in his voice, "I have come."

CHAPTER V.

THERE was just the faintest colour in her face; but her eyes met his unabashed and with a sweet gravity and dignity in them; there might have been a tremor of the lips, or Lance

might only have fancied that there was. As for him, as he took the hand, not venturing to press it, his brain whirled and his frank, handsome face reddened, then went pale again under the stress of his intense curiosity—but curiosity is too vulgar a word—and interest.

"I am glad," he said; "I thought, I was afraid you were not coming. Shall we walk here?"

She indicated a narrow turning which led only to a farm, and she walked beside him in silence for a moment; then, with a little gesture which conveyed so much of her doubt and uncertainty, she said:

"You are wondering, Mr. le Breton, why—why I asked you. Don't answer me for a moment, please," she put in, quickly, with a girlish impulsiveness and queenliness. "I am afraid you will not deal fairly with me—I mean that you will reply with some compliment, something that is not true. It must seem so strange to you that a girl, a lady—I am a lady, Mr. le Breton—"

He moved his hand in emphatic assent.

—"Should ask a gentleman, a stranger, to—to meet her alone. You have never known, read of anyone, any lady doing so. Ah, no! I am sure you have not."

He looked straight into her eyes; he was swearing to himself that he would deal honestly with her, that he would not utter the ordinary commonplaces, but would speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. How could he do otherwise, with these lovely, sad eyes reading his soul?

"No," he said, bravely, "I don't think I have. Yes, it sounded strange to me when you—asked me; it has seemed strange ever since—and I've been thinking of it ever since; but now you are here and I am listening to you, it does not seem strange or out of the way. I can't tell you why—I'm not clever at analysing and that kind of thing—I only know that it appears the most natural thing in the world. There! I've spoken the absolute truth, Miss Jermyn. And now, you will tell me why—what it is that you wanted me for?"

She was silent for a moment, her eyes bent on the ground, her brows knitted. He glanced at her lovely face, the graceful figure in its black dress, that, for all its sombreness, had something bewitchingly soft and distinguished about it, and the tide of his admiration rose to the flood.

"I thought I could," she said, in a low voice, rather to herself than him; "but—but I find I cannot—not yet. Will you give me a little time, Mr. le Breton? Shall we talk of



something else—of yourself? I will be thinking, meanwhile, and I may find courage—I shall want a great deal! Your cousin, Lady May, has just left me; she told me a great deal about you. She seems very fond of you.”

“Oh, May; yes! I am glad she called. I asked her to call to-day. We are great pals. She is the dearest of girls. I hope you will like her!”

“I do, very much,” said Kyra, softly; “and I envy her. It must be so good to have friends and relations to love and to love one. I have none. I never had anyone, no relation that I knew but my father; and he is dead, as you know. We always lived alone together—I can remember that I could scarcely be persuaded to leave his side when I was a child; and, for some reason or other, he did not care for me to make friends with the other children of the stations—I mean, the white children. I used to play with the ayahs’ little ones. I can talk Hindoostani as well as a native; my mother— But this is not talking about you, is it?”

“I would infinitely rather listen to you, especially when you talk of yourself,” said Lance, eagerly, but not so eagerly as to frighten her. He knew that she was struggling for courage to tell him why she had asked him to meet her, and he wanted to encourage, to soothe her. “There isn’t much to tell that I didn’t tell you last night,” he went on. “My father was a cousin of the earl’s: he’s dead: so is my mother. I was left with a small—what do they call it?—patrimony, which I soon ran through. There’s not much left. I’m a useless sort of beggar, and the only way of getting a living, as Pat says, is to go out and get shot at. That’s why I’ve joined the Border Brigade. I hope to get a chance on the fighting and—and—oh, well, I don’t know scarcely what it will lead to. Not much of a prospect, you’ll say, Miss Jermyn.”

“I suppose not,” she said. “I know so little of the world—nothing, indeed, quite nothing. One leads the life of a child only in the lonely places in India, in which we lived.”

“And yet—” he paused a moment. “Yes, I’ll speak openly, Miss Jermyn; last night I was struck by your—your composure. I—I mean, you did and said exactly the right thing—” he faltered.

A grave smile shone in her eyes.

“Except when I asked you, a stranger, to meet me? But I know what you mean. Of course, I lived with my father, and know how to behave; and, as for my composure, it is

characteristic of my mother's race: it is always calm until—ah, well, until a storm breaks; then its composure is swept away with the force of a torrent. Sometimes"—she was thinking of her emotion when she had overheard the two Froytes talking about her—"I have been so carried away—But, here again, we are talking about myself."

"And again, I'd rather listen; please, please go on!" he said.

They had reached a stile, and she sat down and clasped her hands loosely in her lap, and Lance leant against the rail, so that he could watch her face: it was gravings itself on his heart more deeply every moment.

"I think you have scarcely done yourself justice," she said, as if she had been communing with herself. "I do not think you are so useless, so—so idle and careless—I don't know the right word to use—as you say. When I saw you last night, I thought that you looked like a man to be relied upon."

Lance's delight fought with his surprise over this random speech, delivered as simply as a child could have spoken it, and with her lovely eyes fixed dreamily on the slope of the Holmby park which rose before them.

"If you mean that you thought *you* could rely on me, you thought right," he said, stilling the beating of his heart. "There is nothing you could ask me to do—please remember, *nothing*—that I wouldn't do, if I could."

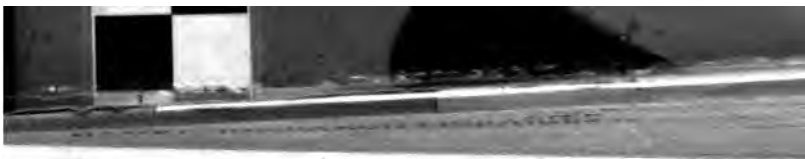
"Thank you," she said in a low voice, and raising her eyes for a brief moment. "Mr. le Breton, there is something I want to ask you to do, but I am afraid. It is so great a thing."

"It can't be too great. I wish you'd take courage, and make me happy by asking," he broke in. "Last night, when I saw you sitting there in the ball-room, I felt as if I must know you—Oh, I know what you think: that it was because you were the most beautiful girl there—far and away the loveliest."

She raised her eyes to his quite calmly; there was not a trace of a blush of pleasure or gratified vanity in her expression; simply deep, profound attention.

"But it wasn't only that. I felt as if I—as if I were drawn towards you. It was the same when I heard you speak, when I danced with you. Oh, I can't explain, but I do hope you understand!"

"I don't think I do, quite. It seems so strange that you should have thought—Why, there were many prettier girls



than I. Your cousin, Lady May, is prettier. She is like an English rose—sweet and fresh—while I—”

“You are like a beautiful exotic, which is far lovelier. Compare you with Lady May! But no matter. That isn’t it.”

“No,” she said, “it does not matter. I am glad if you think me pretty, of course. But ah! no, it does not matter. That you should have felt so—so kindly towards me, so interested is of much greater importance. If I had not thought of you as I did, I should not have asked you to meet me; and now—”

She set her lips, and her hands closed tightly on each other.

—“And now I think I have found some courage; and I will try and tell you, Mr. le Breton—I asked you, because there is no one else in the world to whom I could go—”

“Your guardians—” he said.

A shadow fell over her face.

“No, not to them. We will not speak of them. I do not know of any one but you—”

“I’m glad, glad with all my heart,” he murmured, fervently.

“My guardian and his son are almost strangers to me. I do not like—but we need not speak of them. Mr. le Breton, supposing I were to ask you to do something for me, without telling you a reason, and binding you—with an oath,” her eyes dwelt on his solemnly, “to ask for no reason, to tell no one what you had done until I gave you leave, would you answer me ‘yes,’ or ‘no?’ and if you were to give me your word, the word of an English gentleman, that to no one you would ever tell my request even, would you promise? Ah, do you understand?”

Her hands writhed together and her lips quivered.

Lance felt a thrill run through him. What was it she was going to ask?

“I quite understand,” he said, gravely and gently. “If I consent, I will swear that I will ask no reason, and not speak of it to a living soul unless you give me leave. If I cannot—why, but that’s impossible!”

“No matter! You promise?” she said, with sweet insistence in her voice and in her eyes.

“I promise never to tell anyone what you may ask me!” he responded, solemnly.

She drew a long breath.

“I trust you,” she said. “Yes, I trust you. I must. You will say ‘no,’ I think; but still I must ask you, Mr. le

Breton." Her voice trembled, but she steadied it by an effort marvelous in one so young. "I am in danger—"

"Danger!" The echo sprang from his lips and he started with his eyes flashing, but she calmed him with a slight gesture of the hand from which she had removed her glove.

"Remember your promise! I said in danger; but I am not in bodily peril; others could save me from that; not bodily peril—at least I think not," she added, with a touch of doubt and uncertainty in her voice. "I cannot tell you what it is; but you can save me from it—"

"Then I shall have done something that will have made my life worth living," said Lance, fervently, his eyes seeking hers eagerly. "It is just what I would have asked you to ask me! It is just—oh, it is too good to be true! To be of use, service to you—to *you*!"

He put restraint upon himself, but his face was flushed, his eyes shining. She looked at him with calm surprise, as if she were wondering at his eagerness, his fervour.

"I am glad—grateful," she said. "But wait. You have not yet heard what it is."

"I don't care what it is!" he said in a low voice. "I am absolutely your servant—I tell you so now before you say another word—I'm your slave; you can just command me. Now tell me what it is; ask me!"

She looked at him steadily, with a strangely intense expression in her wonderful eyes.

"Will you marry me?" she asked, in a low but perfectly clear voice.

Lance stared down at her as if he had not heard her, or, rather, as if he fancied he had heard some wild speech too preposterous to have been really spoken. Then slowly the colour left his frank, handsome face, and his eyes darkened and grew almost stern.

"Why do you jest with me, Miss Jermyn?" he said.

The colour rose to her face for an instant, then left it; paler for the transient rush of crimson.

"I—am not jesting," she said, almost inaudibly. "I am asking if you will marry me."

He still stared at her, his face still white.

"Not—not jesting. It's not a joke—a—a trick!" he said, almost to himself. "Not a girlish prank like—like May would play? You mean it—you mean it?"

"Yes, I mean it," she responded.

"Good God!" broke from him; and he put his hand to his



brow, as if the shock of realising that she was in earnest was well-nigh intolerable. "You ask me to marry you?"

"Yes," she said again, with painful calmness. "I knew you would be startled, shocked: I see now how strange, how—how dreadful it must sound to you. You will say 'No;' but you must remember your promise not to tell anyone that I have asked; you will not, if we should meet again, even remind me—"

"Hold on a moment!" he broke in, hoarsely. "I want to think! I can scarcely believe it even now! To—marry—you!"

He drew a long breath and looked away from her a moment, as if the contemplation of her beauty prevented him from thinking, realising. Then he turned to her with feverish earnestness, with a light in his eyes and an eagerness almost paralysing speech.

"And you are in doubt as to what my answer will be! Great Heaven! do you know what it means? *I marry you!* And you doubt! Why, yes, yes, yes!"

His hand went out for hers, but she drew back, shrunk back with surprise and something like fear in her eyes, and his hand fell to his side.

"Wait—ah, wait!" she said in a low voice. "Before you say 'Yes,' remember our agreement. You are not to ask the reason."

"I know! Do I ask?" he responded, fighting for self-restraint.

"You have not heard all. You know that you are not to tell anyone; that it must be a secret."

"I know. I understand. And do you think that would stop me, deter me! Why, think of it! the chance of marrying you, marrying— Why, if anyone had told me that I should get a star from heaven, I should have been as ready to believe in the chance coming off—as of—of marrying you—you! The loveliest woman I have ever seen, or that anyone—a prince of the blood—might give his coronet to win! Am I mad, or dreaming! Tell me—it's *not* a trick! You are in earnest?"

"I am in earnest," she said, her brow knitted, as if his ardour puzzled her. "Can you not see that?"

"Yes!" he drew another long breath. "By Heaven! I think you are! And I saw you for the first time last night! You know nothing about me, what I'm like—good or bad; but don't be afraid! Whatever I am, whatever I've been, I'll

try to be worthy of you; worthy of this great good fortune! Oh, my head's swimming!"

He put out his hand again and bent over her, but she drew back as before. There was silence for a moment, then she said in a low voice, but quite calmly:

"And can you marry me at once?"

"At once!"

He took off his hat and his hand pressed his brow.

"Yes; to-morrow, if I can. I don't know—I don't know whether it can be done: perhaps not so soon, but as soon as the law permits. I'd marry you now, this evening—merciful Heaven, it's too—too good to be true!"

"I don't know either," she said, pondering. "Will you find out?"

He inclined his head. He was dazed by the prospect she had opened out before him: as dazed as Aladdin when the genie shewed him the incalculable riches in the cave and told him they were his.

"But why— No, I remember! I must not ask! And I don't."

"No; you will not ask. I know that I have not trusted you in vain," she said. "I don't know why I know; but I do. Ah, what is the matter?" she broke off; for he had uttered an exclamation, and had struck his fist into the palm of his left hand.

"I—I forgot! I may have to go any moment, any day! My leave— But I'll send in my papers, resign. I'll give it up—"

"No," she said, simply. "You must not do that! I knew that you would be going. You must go."

"What! and leave you?" he said, staring at her, then bursting into a laugh, not loud, but full of tender irony.

"Yes," she said, gravely. "It was partly because of that. Why should you give up your regiment, why should you stay behind?"

"Why should I—"

The crimson showed behind his tan, his eyes dwelt upon hers wonderingly, amazedly, then he bit his lip and evaded the innocent depths of her pure eyes.

"There is no reason," she said. "Indeed, it was because you were going, would be away for years that I thought of you, found courage to ask you. It was because it would be easier for you to say 'Yes!'"

"Easier!" he stammered. "I don't understand!"

"Why, yes," she said, with sweet gravity. "If you had



been living here, been going to stay, I could not have asked you, could I? Do you not see? You will marry me, and there will be no more trouble for you. You will not see me again—after the ceremony, I mean.”

He leant against the rail of the stile and wiped the big drops of sweat from his face, and it is scarcely too much to say that he shook with the emotion that her words caused. It was as if the Vision Splendid had suddenly faded. It was Aladdin staring at a pile of dust and ashes where the incalculable treasure had been shining only a moment before.

“But—leave—you—after the ceremony! But—but why?” he stammered.

“I cannot tell you,” she said in a low voice. “You will not ask. Are you sorry you consented? It is not too late to take it back.”

She half rose; but he put out his hand to stay her.

“No, no, don’t—don’t move. I—I was rather astonished, that is all. And I won’t ask—I am to—to leave you, to say good-bye—”

“Yes: why not? It is an—an arrangement we are making, is it not? And you have not asked me your—your share, what benefit you will get—”

“Good God!” he broke out in a pained voice. “Don’t—don’t put it like that! Benefit!”

“But why not?” she said, calmly, persuasively. “Is it not fair? Would you not expect me to ask for some benefit if the proposal came from you?”

“Oh, go on!” he said, with a kind of despair, as if, having already borne so much, he could bear anything.

She put her hand to her lips, as if seeking for words to express her meaning.

“I may be rich,” she said.

Lance winced, but he set his teeth.

“I do not know for certain; I cannot be sure; but from something I—yes, overheard, I think that I may be rich. If so, I will give it all to you.”

He ground his teeth.

“Oh, thanks!” he said in bitter irony; “but isn’t that rather too—generous? Wouldn’t half be fairer?”

“Do you think so?” she said, with the same gentle gravity. “If you think so, it shall be as you say. Half. But, indeed, I may be wrong. I may not be able to get it—oh, I cannot tell you—that is why it is so hard!”

“Never mind,” he said, trying to speak in a matter-of-fact tone, finding it difficult to refrain from breaking out into a

groan or a wild, hysterical shout: remember the girl's beauty, and the effect upon him—already under its spell. "What you ask is that I shall marry you, that I should leave you directly after the ceremony, that I should keep our marriage a secret. Tell no one; that, in fact, it should be just as if it were a dream; the only real—what do you call it?—tangible part of it is represented by the fact that you will bestow half your fortune on me when you get it."

Now, this statement, as one reads it, sounds as if Lance, provoked beyond all patience, were indulging in a very pardonable irony; but it was not so. Preposterous as the proposal reads, there was nothing—but leaving her after the ceremony—preposterous in it to Lance. He was under the glamour of her beauty, of the sweet voice whose low tones thrilled him, and—who knows, for who can analyse the heart of man?—perhaps still more influenced by the calmness, the *sang froid* of her manner. It was as if a goddess, immaculate, invulnerable to love's dart, were conferring with a mortal. And yet the goddess, for all her calmness and coldness, was so young, so beautiful! and there was a touching tenderness in her lovely eyes which was both innocent and womanly.

"Yes," she assented, after a moment's thought. "We shall never meet again after the ceremony. I will never tell anyone—unless I am obliged: I may be; I trust, I pray that I may not be—"

Lance stared at her in a kind of chronic amazement.

—"But I can, I will, promise never to claim you. You need not be afraid of that. If we should meet, we will not recognize each other, or, if we do, only as friends, acquaintances."

Lance stroked his moustache with a hand that shook as it had never shaken before.

"And—and the peril, danger? Who is to look after you, protect you while I, your husband, am away?"

She looked before her in silence for a moment, then she turned to him with a strange smile, a smile that had something of triumph in it.

"The peril will cease when I am married," she replied. "I can tell you so much: you will not ask me to tell you any more—will not try to find out. I have your promise."

"You have," he said; "and I've got a queer knack of keeping my promises."

"I know it," she said, simply. "I mean, I read it in your face, your eyes."

The colour sprang to his face and a sudden glow of light to



his eyes; but the colour and the light faded as he met her calm, aloof gaze.

"I feel that I can trust you to the uttermost point."

"You can," he said, a trifle hoarsely; "and you want my answer. Well, I've given it to you already—"

"No, no!" she broke in. "You have not had time to think. With me it is different. When I saw you last night I determined, if you were not married, not engaged—" She started and looked at him with a sudden doubt. "You are not engaged? Strange! I never asked you."

"No," he said, "I'm not engaged, that's evident, or I couldn't have said 'Yes.'"

"I am glad," she murmured, with a little sigh of relief. "I have been thinking for some time of this plan, proposal; but it has come as a surprise, a shock to you. You must not answer on the spur of the moment. Let me think. I may be able to meet you here to-morrow at the same time. It need be for a moment only, just time to say 'Yes' or 'No,' but, on the other hand, I may not. Well, then, I must leave it to a chance meeting. If, when we meet, you raise your right hand, I shall know it is 'Yes,' but if you raise your left, I shall know it is 'No.'"

"Take my answer now," he said, as calmly as he could. "It is 'Yes,' as I said from the first."

But she shook her head.

"It would not be fair. And it is so important—to you."

"Not to you?" he breathed, in amazement.

She shook her head again with an air of utter indifference.

"It does not matter to me. I mean to myself, my own feelings, whether I am married or not. Life will be the same—but the danger will be averted; you will have saved me from the peril I cannot tell you of. I must go now—how quickly the time has passed! and there still seems so much to say, to explain. Even now I feel as if I cannot have made you understand."

She rose and put the long, white, delicately formed hand out to her cheek in a gesture unlike anything English.

"Don't be afraid," he said, without a touch of irony. "I understand perfectly."

"Then to-morrow you will tell me, if I can come, if not, when next we meet. Good-bye—and thank you for promising to think of it."

She held out her hand, and he held it in his and pressed it; but it was cool and irresponsive.

"Good-bye," he said, "I don't want any time, but it shall be as you say. I will come to-morrow."

With a little gesture of farewell, a mute gratitude in her eyes and in the faint, sad smile on her lips, she withdrew her hand and went from him. She passed quickly into the lane, but walked more slowly as she went on, and sauntered into the Elms garden in a casual, listless way.

Mrs. Froyte was watching for her from the terrace and came to meet her.

"Have you been for a walk, Kyra? I hope you are not tired. You look pale."

Kyra shrugged her shoulders.

"I am not tired," she said, simply, and with that air of natural reserve which was characteristic of the Oriental in her.

She went to her room and took off her things slowly, mechanically, as if she were going over the strange scene in which she had taken a still stranger part; then, suddenly, as if she had half realised—she could not do so wholly—what it was that she had done, the blood rushed to her face, her eyes were weighted as if with shame and she threw up her hands to cover them. At that moment a fly drew up and Stracey Froyte's voice reached her.

Instantly her mood and manner changed, the hot blood ebbed back from her face and her eyes flashed with a mixture of defiance and despair.

"I will do it! I will do it!" she murmured. "Anything, anything to escape him!"

CHAPTER VI.

THERE surely did not exist at this moment in all the wide world so bewildered and agitated a young man as Lance le Breton. He stood stock-still, as if chained to the spot, until Kyra was out of sight; then he sank on to the step of the stile, and, leaning his head on his hands, gazed at the view with blinded eyes. His brain felt as if it were reeling under some great shock. Again and again he went over every word she had spoken, recalled every look of the lovely face, every expression of the wonderful eyes.

The girl, whom at first sight he had thought one of the loveliest, to whom he had been drawn as if by some magnetic influence, had asked him to marry her.

Now, if some man had related to Lance the experience which he himself had just passed through, he would have



laughed and promptly hinted at some base motive for the proposal, would have declared the girl to be an adventuress who was endeavouring to use the man for her own ends. But he knew that no such charge could stand against Miss Jermy. Her purity, her innocence proclaimed themselves in her eyes, her face, her voice, and so plainly that the veriest boor and dolt could not fail to recognize and bow down before them. No, whatever the danger was, it had not been incurred by any folly or crime of hers. Upon that he could stake his life; and mark! Lance was not a simpleton, but a young man who knew his world, and knew it tolerably well.

As soon as he had heard the proposal he was ready to say "Yes." But the conditions! That they should separate after the marriage, should not meet again! It was this that staggered and bewildered and nearly maddened him.

For he felt that he loved her already; yes, it was love at first sight, and the seeing her again, the talking—and what strange talking!—only had more ripened that love. It is the quickest fruit in the world to ripen; it only needs the sun of opportunity, of proximity. But to marry and lose her forever!

"Now, let me be calm," he said to himself, actually speaking, but in a low voice. "What does it mean? That I tie myself for life—for life!—to a woman of whom I know nothing. That I'm never to claim her, never to admit that I've married her. Good Lord! anyone would say that I am a born idiot to think of it; that I should be stark, staring mad to do it. But then, they might not have seen her, might not have looked into those eyes of hers, heard her voice. Why, if I should be bound to her, she would be bound to me. And—and only to know, to be able to tell myself that she was *my wife*, that she couldn't be any other fellow's, would be better than being free. I should never love another woman. She is the one, the only one in the world for me. Besides—ah, that is it!—she wants me to do it; it will help her: God knows how! She said she was in danger: what can it be? But no! I won't think of it, won't try to guess it. Whatever it is, it must be a great peril, or she would not fly to such a remedy. Poor girl! poor girl! Oh, my beautiful angel!"

His eyes glowed, and he threw out his hands.

"Why, I'd give my life to be of service to you; just to hear you whisper 'Thank you!' Hesitate! No, not for a moment! And yet—and yet—I'll do as I promised; I'll think it out, so that I may tell her that I have not rushed at it on the impulse of the moment—Marry her! She is to be my wife! Oh, it's a dream, that's what it is—but no, it's no dream: I'm to

separate from her—never to see her, claim her—no, I'm awake, worse luck! That proves I'm awake!"

He got up at last, and went back to the Hall. There was just time to dress for dinner, and he gave the patient valet a great deal of trouble; for he stopped now and again, with one arm in his coat, or his braces in his hand, as if lost in thought. But he was dressed at last, and he went down to the drawing-room.

May was there alone, and she sprang at him, and caught at the lapels of his coat and gave him an excited little shake.

"Oh, Lance! I've seen her!" she said, in an excited whisper. "I've spent nearly two hours with her—such hours! She's—she's wonderful; that's the only word to describe her!"

"Who are you talking about?" he demanded, with a lack of grammar and candour.

"Who?" she gave him a little push of disgust. "Why, Kyra—Miss Jermyn, of course! Whom else should I mean! Didn't you ask me to call? Really, Lance, you are more stupid than ever—if that were possible!"

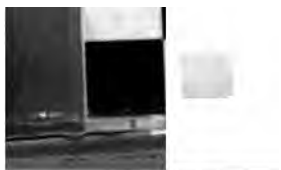
"Oh, pardon, pardon!" he said, with a capital imitation of penitence. "So you like her, eh?"

"Like her? I love her!" retorted May, fervently. "She's the sweetest girl I've ever met! You couldn't help loving her; she's so lovely and so, so—gentle, and yet—oh, well, I can't describe her! But, Lance, I'm afraid she has had a great deal of trouble."

Lance nodded with suppressed eagerness. Had she confided to any extent in May? But he checked the impulse of curiosity; he would not seek to know, hanker to know; she had asked him to trust her in blind ignorance, and he would keep his word.

"Yes; she is so sad, and every now and then she seems lost in thought, as if something were weighing upon her. It's almost as if there were some thing upon her. It's like a statue's or some beautiful thing. Perhaps some day she'll tell me what it is, for I want to let me be her friend. And you should see her! It is so heavenly! I don't know what it is, but it makes and strains my nerves. I declare, Aunt Adderley, about the fish."

She continued to say to her, said —



"Yes, one of 'em went over a pound and a quarter, May. What have I been doing all day, aunt? Oh, fishing and—"

"And lounging generally, I suppose," said Aunt Adderley, with an acid smile. "The Bretons were always good at that. But I wish you wouldn't encourage May; she is always too ready to gossip and neglect her lessons. I'm sure I don't wonder at the levity and want of dignity displayed by young women of the present day; they cease to be girls long before they leave the school-room. At her age I was not allowed to enter the drawing-room after four o'clock in the afternoon; and certainly should not have been permitted to hold *tête-à-têtes* with young men whenever I chose."

"Oh, that's all right, aunt," he said, soothingly, "I'm a first-class companion for the young; so informing and improving, you know!"

"I think you're very impertinent—but all the Le Bretons are. I see nothing to laugh at, May—rather the reverse," she added, sternly, as May, choking a laugh, left the room.

The earl and Arthur came in, and they went in to dinner. The old man was rather more grumpy than usual, and Arthur, though he had taken only a spectator's part at the ball, maundering from one group of dowagers to another, and telling them of his new "treatment," seemed exhausted by his efforts.

"Awful crowd last night," he said, with a long sigh that was almost a groan; "I was awake all night, and had to have recourse to sulphonel; valuable preparation, Lance. Did you ever try it?"

"No, I stick to the good old soda-and-whiskey if I'm chippy," said Lance, cheerfully, and Arthur, with a shrug of contempt, returned to the patent food which constituted his dinner.

"I always hated politics," remarked the earl. "It's a vulgar business now, whatever it may have been in the old times; but I suppose Edward finds it necessary to go in for it. I wish to goodness he would do it without filling Holmby with a mob like that of last night. Who was that pretty girl with the dark hair and grey eyes, Arthur? A rather foreign-looking girl, nicely dressed?"

Arthur looked up with lack-lustre orbs.

"I'm sure I don't know, sir; I daresay Lance could tell you; it's more in his line."

Lance's heart beat. He knew that they were speaking of—the woman he was going to marry. If they only knew

"I think you mean Miss Jermyn," he said, as calmly as he could.

"Yes—ah, yes, that's the name!" said Lord Ashleigh. "Striking-looking girl! Came with the people who have taken the Elms, didn't she? Queer name—can't remember—"

"Froyte," said Lance.

"Yes; a tabby-cat sort of woman, and a young man; queer-looking man, with dark eyes that he didn't seem too fond of showing. I spoke to him," said Arthur, languidly. "Didn't seem to know anybody except Doctor Graham—I wonder Graham doesn't go in for this new treatment."

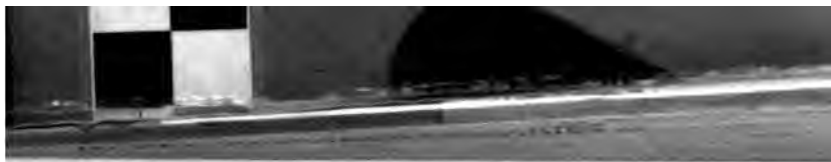
"D—n the new treatment! I'm sick of it already," grumbled the earl. "Pass the port, Lance."

"Better not; you'll be worse to-morrow," remarked Arthur, indifferently.

"Couldn't," replied his father. "I tell you what, Arthur, I'd rather have a good, honest gout than the beastly, effeminate, nervy things you've got. Ugh! Fill your own glass first, Lance. Lord! it's good to see a man who drinks his port *like* a man. Deuced bad wine you'll get in that pauper regiment of yours, my boy!"

When the tedious meal was over and the earl had shuffled into the drawing-room to sleep it off, and Arthur had crawled up to his room to take a dose, Lance went into the smoking-room, and, lighting a big cigar, sat down "to think." But how could he think, weigh the proposal that had haunted him all dinner-time, when his mental powers—never very great—were thrown into confusion by the vision of that lovely face that was making such havoc in his heart? He started to his feet and began pacing the room, then suddenly he crossed the hall to the library and began hunting up and down the shelves. It was a magnificent room—one of the Ashleighs had been bookish, and had formed a collection—but very few persons entered it; and, as no one cared about the books, there was no attempt at order. At last he happened upon a Whittaker and a popular hand-book of law—one of the books which lawyers declare bring them so much extra work, just as the popular household medicine books send extra patients to the doctors—and he threw himself into a couch and studied the chapters on "The Law of Marriage."

He was startled by the apparent ease with which a couple could tie themselves up in that bond which lasts till death—or divorce—sets them free; and he pencilled some notes in his old and well-worn pocket-book. The very fact of doing



this solidified his resolution, and he went back to the smoking-room with his face flushed and his eyes sparkling.

The following day seemed to have eight-and-forty hours. It is scarcely necessary to say that he spent most of it in solitude, avoiding even May; for he dreaded lest, in talking of Kyra—which she would be certain to do—she should surprise his secret. He went for a ride in the morning, considerably astonishing his horse—a sensible and well-mannered animal—by the pace at which he was kept; but, in the afternoon, he walked over the hills—walked hard and fast, in harmony with his racing thoughts—and, at six, found himself, like a man in a feverish dream, at the stile in the lane.

The quarter chimed, and he was almost wild with impatience and disappointment before she came, with her graceful, gliding gait, round the corner of the lane. He sprang forward to meet her and held out his hand. It trembled, but hers was quite steady; he noticed that, even in his agitation. He noticed, too, that she was paler even than she had been yesterday, and that her beautiful eyes looked troubled and sad.

"I have not a moment," she said, swiftly, but with perfect calm. "Have you thought—considered— But wait! I, too, have been thinking, pondering, and—and I see now that I asked too much, that you have no right to consent, that the sacrifice—it is so uncertain that the bargain may not be all on my side—the money—"

His face flushed and he laid his hand on her arm.

"For God's sake, don't talk, don't think of the—money!" he said, hoarsely. "I've tried to forget it, and have succeeded. I don't want to think of it now or ever!"

She did not blush at his touch or withdraw from it; her clear eyes met his steadily, questioningly.

"But—" she began, in her low, sweet voice.

"Don't let's waste time," he pleaded. "I've come to tell you that it is 'Yes! Yes! Yes!'"

She drew a long breath, and now the colour rose to her face.

"It is 'Yes!'" she echoed. "I—I—am glad."

He nodded.

"That's all right," he said. "I've gone over the whole thing, and I'm of the same mind I was yesterday, the moment I heard you. Now—you want—I mean we must be married at once."

She made a gesture of assent, her eyes still meeting his unflinchingly.

"That's all right, too!" he said, trying to speak cheerily, as if it were quite an ordinary business, quite an ordinary marriage. "I've been looking up some books—on marriage, you know, and I find it can be done—Lord, it's easy enough! I'll run up to town to-morrow and put things in hand. When I come back I'll meet you here—the day after. If I can't, I'll put a letter under the stone." He partly uplifted a large stone at the foot of one of the posts. "I'll tell you everything; the way we must manage it—at least, my part of it. I don't know how you will—"

She waved her hand.

"I will arrange," she said, simply. "I, too, will write and place my letter in the same place." She held out her hand. "I must go or I shall be missed; they think I am in the garden. There is no time even to thank you. Ah, but I do, I do! If you knew—"

"There's no need to thank me!" he said, huskily. "I know nothing, except that I am going to marry you—that I—"

"Love you!" was on his lips; but the calm, the absolute coldness in the lovely eyes froze the words before they could be uttered.

She sighed, withdrew her hand, and, with one grateful glance that made the blood rush to Lance's face, she turned and left him.

CHAPTER VII.

KYRA went back to the Elms. Her heart was beating rather fast, but it was only with the excitement of a person who has completed an arrangement—almost a business arrangement—of great importance. She attributed Lance le Breton's emotion to the same cause. It did not occur to her for a moment that he had been fighting against the expression of the passion of love; she would not have believed it, if any one had told her that it was so. No thought of love was in her own mind; the matter was just one of contract between two parties, each of whom was to benefit by the bargain.

But she was grateful to the young fellow who had come to her aid so chivalrously, and she hoped with an intense hope that she might prove to be rich and that he would gain by the arrangement. The fact was, she was not in a position to real-



the full significance of what she was doing. The fear and loathing she entertained for Stracey Froyte impelled her as a boat is impelled by the deadly undercurrent of a cataract stream and deadened her sense of proportion and even of right and wrong.

Mrs. Froyte watched her enter the garden; but Kyra's sauntering gait and impassive face lulled any suspicions the elder woman might have had; and Kyra went to her room unquestioned. She dressed with unusual care that evening, and paused at the door, as she was about to go down, to nerve herself for the task before her; for, since the evening she had overheard the father and son talking about her, she had forced herself to treat Stracey with a feigned friendliness.

He was standing by the drawing-room window as she entered, his hands clasped behind him, his head bent in the watchful, listening attitude which she so disliked; and he turned to her with the smile which she disliked still more.

"What a lovely evening, Kyra!" he said. "Have you been for a stroll? You are looking very well to-night, ever so much better than you used to. Doctor Graham's treatment is doing you good."

"Oh, I am quite well!" she said. "Yes; I have been for a stroll."

She made her response quite easily and met his eyes as calmly, but her heart beat quickly; for she knew how perfectly he could conceal his thoughts behind that mask of a smile.

"You and I must have some good walks and drives, now you are strong," he said. "Have you seen anything more of your new friend, Lady May?"

"No," said Kyra.

"Mother and you must call," he said. "They are people worth knowing I should think; and we must not forget Doctor Graham's advice that you should see some society."

"I shall be very glad," Kyra responded, indifferently. "She is a nice girl and very friendly."

He nodded and went to the window again; but Kyra, though she avoided looking at him, knew that he was watching her from the corner of his half-covered eyes.

Mrs. Froyte and her husband came in a moment or two afterwards, and she saw the father glance with nervous questioning from her to Stracey, as he rubbed his hands and murmured something about the beauty of the evening.

They went in to dinner. It was usually a sombre meal, over-

shadowed by the strange air of constraint which was characteristic of the Froyte family; but this evening Stracey seemed to be making an effort to lift the dead weight, and forced a conversation, addressing himself almost exclusively to Kyra. She listened and replied with a show of interest, but all the time she was thinking of the bargain, the contract she had made with Lance le Breton. Would he be able to arrange the marriage—and how soon? she was asking herself.

As a rule she ate very little, but to-night she reflected that she needed all her strength for the task she had set herself, and she accepted most of the things offered her and drank a glass of wine. Stracey was watching her, as she knew, and once she saw him smile swiftly across to his father with an air of satisfaction.

After dinner she went to the piano in the drawing-room and began to play softly so that she might not be compelled to talk to Mrs. Froyte, and she was still playing when the two men came in.

Presently she was aware that the husband and wife had left the room, and, glancing round, with an attempt to conceal the dread that assailed her whenever she was alone with Stracey, she saw him standing on the hearthrug with something in his hand. He smiled as his eyes met hers, and came across to her.

"My father and I were very busy in London yesterday, Kyra," he said, "but I found time to give myself a little pleasure. I was walking down Bond Street, and saw something that I thought you might care to have; that you would be so gracious as to accept: will you?"

He opened the jewel-case he held in his hand and displayed a costly diamond bracelet, which flashed its rays into Kyra's startled eyes. She drew back almost as if the thing had been a snake coiled for the spring; then suddenly she forced a smile and an exclamation of admiration and pleasure.

"What a beautiful bracelet!" she said. "And did you buy it for me? It is very kind of you! But isn't it too grand and expensive? There are so many diamonds and such large ones. Why did you buy so handsome and rich a one? I am too young, too insignificant, to wear so grand a thing."

He smiled under his half-lowered lids as he turned the bracelet over so that it glittered like a live thing.

"It is not half good enough," he said in his soft, subdued voice. "I should have liked to buy you one twice as handsome and costly; and you would have worn it with perfect grace however grand it might have been, but I thought you



would have considered it too gorgeous. And you will accept it, Kyra?"

"Certainly I will," she said, trying to speak brightly, and she held out her hand for it; but he took the long, delicate hand and fastened the thing round her wrist. She set her teeth and repressed the shudder caused by his touch, and forced a smile.

"Thank you, very much. Yes, it is very beautiful. It was very kind of you to think of me," she said, as she turned the bracelet so that the light from the shaded lamp could fall on it.

"My dear Kyra, I am always thinking of you," he murmured, coming a step closer and bending over her. "When I was in the jeweller's shop I was wishing that I could choose something else rather than a bracelet. Can you guess what it was?"

She looked up at him for an instant, then shrunk before his gaze and fixed her eyes on the bracelet again.

"No; a pendant perhaps? But I like this so much better. A bracelet is always so useful."

"No; not a pendant, but a ring," he said. "I wanted to buy you an engagement-ring, Kyra; but I had not the right to do so. Would you have been very angry if I had done so; would you have conceded the right, would you have worn it?"

"I—I don't understand," she faltered, growing pale, her whole soul rising in revolt against the hypocrisy of his feigned humility and deference.

"Can you not?" he said. "Have you not guessed my secret? I have tried to hide it because—well, you have been in great trouble, and your sorrow has made you sacred in my eyes, in all our eyes; but, Kyra, you cannot be blind to the fact that I love you, that I want you to be my wife?"

She held her breath, compelled herself to be calm. After all, she told herself, she was prepared for this. The plot had developed more swiftly than she had expected; but surely she was prepared.

He watched her closely; but, cunning as he was, he was deceived by her assumption of surprise and embarrassment.

"I am afraid you will think it very sudden, Kyra," he purred; "but it was not sudden with me. Was it not natural that I, a lonely wanderer coming to this happy, peaceful home, should fall in love with the star that brightened and beautified it; that I should long to make that star my own?"

As she thought of the air of mystery and constraint which hung over the "happy and peaceful home," of the plot these

two men had concocted against her peace and happiness, her very liberty, the blood surged to her brain, and she had hard work to restrain herself from springing to her feet and flinging his gift in his false face; but the thought of the bargain she had made with Lance le Breton nerved her, and she sat still and silent.

"And what is your answer, Kyra?" he murmured. "Am I too precipitate? If so, forgive me, and let my eagerness to win you plead for me. Are you going to make me the happiest man in the world, and the proudest?"

She looked straight before her, her face pale, her dark brows set.

"It is very sudden," she said, in a constrained voice. "I did not know—" She checked herself on the verge of the falsehood; for did she not know? "I cannot tell you. You must give me time—"

He heaved a sigh and smiled down at her pleadingly.

"Of course I will!" he said, softly. "I scarcely expected that you would say 'Yes' at once; but, Kyra, you will let me hope? You will let me try and win you? Remember that you will not only make me happy, but my father and mother, who are so fond of you. And"—he paused a moment and lowered his voice—"perhaps I ought not to speak of it, ought not to let it sway you, but, Kyra, your father—it was his wish, almost the last, my father tells me, that you should be my wife, the wife of his friend's son."

She rose, white to the lips, driven almost beside herself by the lie; and her eyes flashed into his with indignant repudiation; but she put her hand to her lips to stifle the cry that sprang to them and stood with downcast eyes and heaving bosom.

Stracey Froyte watched her from the corner of his eyes.

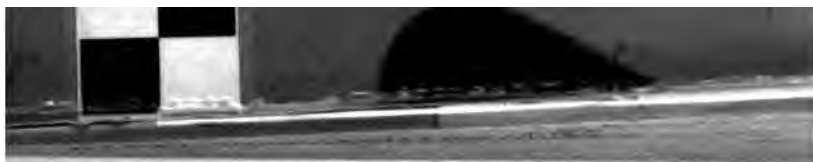
"I am almost sorry that I told you that," he murmured; "but you must not let it weigh with you. I want you to love me for myself alone. Will you try, Kyra?"

He took her hand, but she withdrew it and thrust it behind her, where it closed and unclosed spasmodically.

"You—you must give me time," she breathed. "I—I cannot answer—yet!"

"Why, of course," he said, soothingly. "I don't want to hurry or harass you. But you know now and will think it over, Kyra?"

"Yes," she said, almost inaudibly; and she stood breathing painfully, dreading lest he should attempt to take her hand and kiss it; but he was too wise, too cunning, to drive



her too hard, and, with a softly murmured "Dear Kyra!" left the room.

She stood where he had left her for a moment or two, struggling for breath; then, as if awaking from a hideous dream, she tore the bracelet from her arm, and, flinging it on the ground, set her foot on it and ground it into the carpet, her hands clenched, her teeth flashing. At that moment, strangely enough, there rushed across her mind the deep, manly voice of Lance le Breton, contrasting with the soft, false one of the man who was striving to ensnare her. Something in the remembrance of Lance's voice helped to calm her; and, after a moment or two, she picked up the bracelet, and, shuddering, fastened it on her arm again.

But she could not face the Froytes again that night, and she went to her room. The window was open, and she glided to it and drew in long breaths of the cool night-air; then suddenly she threw out her arms in the direction of the Hall and panted:

"Oh, help me! help me! You have promised: do not forget; do not forsake me!"

Stracey went to a small room which the two men used as a smoking-room, and in which his father was sitting, with his head upon his hands. He started as Stracey entered, and he looked up at him enquiringly.

Stracey lit a cigarette and regarded his father with a sinister smile.

"That bracelet was a good idea of mine," he said, with an air of satisfaction.

"You gave it—she was pleased?" said James Froyte, nervously.

Stracey nodded.

"Oh, yes! Trust a woman to be pleased with diamonds."

"Kyra does not care in the least for jewels," said James Froyte, doubtfully.

"Even the divine and highly strung Kyra is not insensible to the glittering bauble," sneered Stracey. "She was quite overcome. I wonder whether she would have been so delighted if she had known that the thing was bought with her money? I seized the opportunity to break the ice," he added, narrowing his eyes to slits.

James Froyte started.

"It—it was very sudden—very soon. I—I hope it was not too soon, Stracey; you know best; but Kyra—"

"Pshaw!" broke in Stracey, contemptuously. "You s—"

ways stick her on a pedestal. She's not different to other girls; and every girl is pleased with a proposal."

"Then—then she consented?" exclaimed James Froyte, in a hushed voice.

"Well, no, not exactly. I didn't expect her to do so. As you say, it was rather soon. Oh, no; but she didn't refuse."

The elder man frowned at the empty fire-place thoughtfully.

"I'm—I'm rather surprised," he muttered. "I didn't think that—that she cared for you."

"You're complimentary," said Stracey, with a sneer that was almost a scowl. "Why shouldn't she accept me? But no prophet has honour in his own country, so I mustn't complain, I suppose, if it seems incredible to you that a woman should fall in love with me. Why, you must have been blind not to have noticed the difference in her manner to me lately! No; she hasn't accepted me; but she has promised to consider it; and when a woman considers she is—lost."

There was something so sinister in the tone in which his son spoke the words that James Froyte looked up quickly and with something like apprehension in his nervous, careworn face.

"Yes," continued Stracey, in his soft voice, as he watched the rings of smoke from his cigarette. "I think I see the end of our difficulties. And, by Heaven! it can't come too soon! When I think of that money and all that I can do with it"—he glanced round the small room contemptuously—"when I think of the life that opens out to me—ah, well; I find it hard to play the part of the patient lover. All my life I've been hampered and fettered by the want of coin—I, with my gifts, my looks, my ambitions! And now—"

He drew a long breath and stared into vacancy with a smile on his thin lips.

"Don't—don't count too much on that," faltered James Froyte. "She may say 'No.' She is—"

"Oh, I know!" Stracey interrupted. "She's different to every other woman. She may say 'No,' she may refuse me; but I don't think she will. If she should—" He stopped, and his teeth—they were white and large—the canine especially—closed so sharply over the cigarette that he bit it through. "Oh, well," he went on, as he took another from his case and lit it deliberately. "There is another way, as the cookery book says."

James Froyte's face went pale, and he regarded his son's



sinister one with a kind of vague fear; then suddenly he rose and stole noiselessly to the door, but stood listening intently.

"What is it?" asked Stracey, with a frown of annoyance.

"What are you listening for?"

"There is someone outside," said James Froyte, in a husky whisper.

"Well, if there is—" began Stracey, impatiently.

The door opened and Mrs. Froyte came in with the spirit tray.

"Here is the whiskey, James," she said, in her subdued, toneless voice. "I brought it in myself, because I thought you and Stracey were talking business and Mary would disturb you."

"Oh, all right," said Stracey. "We were only chatting. Put it down: thanks."

Mrs. Froyte set the tray on a round table and went out again, without raising her eyes.

"There, you see!" said Stracey, contemptuously. "You carry your nervousness to a point very nearly touching idiocy. Anyone would think we were a couple of conspirators plotting a deep-dyed crime."

James Froyte opened his lips as if about to retort, but, with a fearful glance at his son, checked himself and went and poured out a stiff help of whiskey, with a hand that shook like a leaf.

CHAPTER VIII.

LANCE went up to London the next day "to hurry on his kit," as he explained to the earl, who displayed a novel and flattering reluctance to his temporary absence.

"By Gad, Lance, you're the only living man in the family; it's pleasant to have you about. If we could only find something for you, some place under government, you could give up this ridiculous soldiering idea of yours. But, there! you can't get anything from your party nowadays; the beastly newspaper fellows watch everything like hawks, and are down on anything that looks like a job. Why, d—n it, in my father's time, we held the borough in our breeches' pockets, and could shove one of the family into a snug berth without the least difficulty. The country's going to the dogs, Lance, that's what it is; and, barring the responsibility and expense, a nobleman is no different to any other man; in fact, I'd as deuced sooner be a rich city chap than what I am. For God's sake, get down in time for dinner; it's a little less like a

funeral when you are here; at any rate, it's a change to listen to a man who knows something about a horse and a gun, instead of being bored to death with Arthur's ailments. Don't shake hands; I've got the gout in my second finger. Want any money? If so—"

Lance declared that he was not in want of money, and refrained from shaking the gouty hand; and promising to be back by dinner, if possible, went off.

He gazed, with feelings better imagined than described, at the windows of the Elms, but there was no sign of Kyra; and the place, shut in by its laurel trees, looked so grim and sombre that it struck a chill to his ardent heart.

He had very modest rooms in Adelphi Terrace. They were small as well as modest, but they commanded a view of the Thames, which, especially at night, was, to use the words of Whistler, weirdly magical; and they were so inexpensive that he could afford to keep them on, even when he was travelling in search of big game or visiting at the houses of the numerous friends who were always delighted to have him.

Mrs. Simpkins, the landlady, who "did for him," met him in the passage; and her motherly heart was concerned at the sight of his grave and somewhat haggard face.

"La, Mr. le Breton, sir, there ain't nothing the matter, is there? You ain't been hill or hanything? You look so anxious and worritted like, that it give me quite a turn."

"No, there's nothing the matter, Mrs. Simpkins," he said, with something like his ordinary cheeriness. "I've only come up to see about my kit."

"Kid!" ejaculated Mrs. Simpkins, much shocked; "and you a single man!"

"No, no; my *kit*, uniform, Mrs. Simpkins."

"Oh, to be sure, yes, sir. But you did give me such a turn, and you so steady and regular."

"That's all right; any letters this morning that you haven't forwarded?"

He turned upstairs, dreading lest he should find the notice to join the brigade. But there was nothing more than the usual dunning letters, reminding him of his "little account;" and he took a cab and went down to Doctors' Commons.

What he wanted was a special license, which, according to the books he had consulted, would permit him to be married to Kyra at any place and at any time; but, at the first set-off, it seemed as if there were insuperable difficulties in the way of his obtaining it. But Lance was one of those fortu-

nate young men whose face and manner work for them; before his frank smile and pleasant voice the officials began to melt; and one of them was so taken by the young man that he went out of his way to smooth the path which is so beset with red tape that the unwary usually get entangled and are overthrown.

In little less than an hour, Lance emerged from the dull and grimy building minus £29 8s, but with the precious license nestling snugly in his breast-pocket.

Then he went to the jeweller's in Bond Street, where, in the past—it was past indeed now—he had been wont to purchase trinkets for presentation to friends and pretty actresses, and, actually with a blush on his handsome face and a glow in his eyes, bought a ring: the wedding-ring. He was offered, and was sorely tempted to buy, a keeper—one set with pearls; but he reflected that Kyra would not be able to wear even the wedding-ring; so he put the temptation from him. But, as he was leaving the shop, he remembered May—dear, little May, his old playmate and constant, loving friend—and he chose a modest ring for her.

Then he went down to his club and got some lunch; but he could scarcely eat it, for he was possessed with a kind of suppressed excitement that set his veins throbbing. Before he left the club he wrote the following lines—wrote them with such difficulty and so much cogitation and tearing up of paper that some of the men glanced at him and at each other and raised their eyebrows knowingly.

“Poor, old Lancel! been getting into another scrape—trying to write a letter—see?”

First, it was difficult to decide how to address her. He longed to begin, “My dearest”—for is not that the sweetest term in which a man can address a woman? And the dearest is the dearest to him of all the millions upon this sad earth of ours. But he knew that Miss Jermyn would be startled and perhaps offended if he called her by such a term of endearment. Then, “My dear Kyra:” that was almost as bad. He had not yet called her by her name, though he always thought of her by it. No; there was nothing for it but “Miss Jermyn;” but it looked so cold, so business-like, that he rejected it, and began the note without any form of address:

“I have made all arrangements, but I must see you. I will send May to you to-morrow morning after breakfast to go for a walk. She will ask you where you would like to go; say, please, by the weir on the Holmby stream. I shall be

fishing there—by accident—and will contrive to get a few minutes alone with you. I hope you have not changed your mind. I needn't say that I've not changed mine.

“LANCE LE BRETON.”

It sounded fearfully cold and matter-of-fact—with not a word of love, not a word of the emotion which even penning the practical lines aroused in him—but he was obliged to be content with it.

All the way down to Holmby, he thought of her; thought of her beauty and grace, and the marvellous fact that he was going to be married to her; and he thrust away from him—as one thrusts away the thought of death—the gruesome reflection, that he would be parted from her forever, immediately after the ceremony.

At the station a dog-cart was waiting for him, but he sent it on, and walking round by the church, sauntered to the stile in the lane, and looking round cautiously to make sure that he was unobserved, placed the letter beneath the stone.

He was awake with the dawn, but he resisted the almost irresistible longing to go down at once to see if the letter had gone; but as soon as breakfast was over, he was off.

To his immense disappointment, the letter was still there; he was staring at it, and turning it over, wondering whether she would be able to come down and get it in time, when he saw some pencilled lines on the back of it:

“I understand,” she had written. “No; I have not changed my mind; and I am very grateful that you have not done so.”

KYRA JERMYN.”

His heart leapt at the sight of her handwriting, and he dwelt upon the characters, which seemed to him typical of her own grace; it was just the kind of hand he would have imagined she would write. But his heart sank as he stowed the note beside the license. She had valued his letter so little that she had felt no desire to keep it, but had written her reply on the back of it.

How significant it was of her entire indifference to him as a lover, of the fact that their marriage was just a business arrangement from which sentiment was to be completely absent.

He found May sitting on the stone coping of the terrace, with a French grammar in one hand and a stick of chocolate in the other; and she greeted him with a cry of delight, followed by a yawn of disgust.



"I am struggling with French irregular verbs, Lance. Isn't it a shame on such a morning as this—will you go halves with me in this chocolate? No? I sha'n't ask you again, mind! Irregular verbs! Fancy a civilized nation like the French going in for such things! Why can't we have one language for the whole world; what on earth is the use of telegraph cables if you can't understand each other? It is my opinion that half the wars are brought about because people misunderstand what each other are talking about."

"Quite right, May," he said. "I know a chap who missed marrying a girl with a million of money, because he couldn't make her comprehend what he wanted: she was Spanish, you see."

May opened her mouth with a delicious grin.

"I don't believe that. Why, you silly, you can kiss a girl in any language!"

"That's true, and so clever of you, my child, that I give you a holiday on the spot. Look here! How would it be if you ran across to Miss Jermyn and took her for a walk? Such a fine day, you know."

May sighed longingly.

"Yes; but where does Miss Barlow come in?"

"Oh, I'll face the dragon and pull her teeth—"

"You can't, they're false," remarked May. "Here she is! For goodness' sake, go away."

Lance threw her a wink, and sauntered across to Miss Barlow; and May, with one eye on her book and the other on the pair, watched with keen anxiety the progress of the negotiations. For a time Miss Barlow preserved her usual stiff and stern demeanour, but presently she began to melt—just as the officials of Doctors' Commons had melted, just as most persons melted under the influence of this ingratiatory young man—and Lance came back to inform May that, in consideration of Mr. le Breton's probably sudden departure for "the battle-field," Lady May could have the desired holiday; but the particular irregular verb, with which she was now struggling, must be repeated in perfect form on the following morning.

May flung up her book and caught it deftly, and shouted a carefully subdued "Hurrah!" for Miss Barlow had not quite got out of hearing.

"I didn't think you would do it, Lance, I didn't indeed. But 'you've such a way with you,' as the maid-servants say. Lance, I've a kind of suspicion that you are a dangerous young man. Never mind; as you've been so good, I will re-

ward you. You shall come for a walk with us. There! what do you say to that?"

"Not much; only that I've a kind of suspicion that you're an exceedingly forward young woman. Thank you, all the same; but I've not something better to do than traipse about the country with a couple of girls."

"Oh, very well," retorted May, with a grimace at him, which would have certainly given Miss Barlow a fit. "Nobody wants you; I don't and I'm sure Kyra doesn't."

She little knew how straight her arrow had sped home, and did not see Lance wince as he walked away.

He waited until, from the hall window, he had seen her start—it took May about a minute and a quarter to fly upstairs for her hat—then he got his fishing-rod and creel, left the house by the back hall and made for the stream. Under such a d happier circumstances his heart would have throbbed with anticipation; even as it was, there was a sublimity in the prospect of meeting Kyra; but the thought of her coldness and indifference cast a chill over him.

May almost ran to the Elms and found Kyra seated on the terrace.

"Oh, what do you think!" she exclaimed; "I have got a solid! It was Lance, my cousin, you know, who did it. Will you come out for a walk with me? Don't say 'No,' for goodness knows when I shall get another. And I say, it was Lance who proposed that I should come for you. I asked him to join us, but"—she shrugged her shoulders with a delicious affectation of worldly wisdom—"you know what men are. Ask them to do something, and they at once want to do something else. But you'll come, won't you?"

Kyra blushed faintly at the deceit she was practising—her life since the night she had overheard the father and son plotting against her, seemed one tissue of deceit—and called to a servant to bring her hat. Mrs. Froyte came out with it, but stopped suddenly at sight of May, and regarded her nervously.

"I am going for a walk with Lady May," said Kyra, calmly.

Mrs. Froyte looked from one to another uncertainly, then murmuring, "Very well; it is a fine morning," disappeared.

"And now, where shall we go?" asked May, as they left by the garden gate.

The blood rose to Kyra's face.

"By the stream," she said. "Is there not a weir there?"

"The very thing!" cried May; "it's the prettiest spot in



Holmby. How clever of you to have hit upon it. Oh, what a lovely morning! And to think that if it hadn't been for Lance, I should be stuck in that hideous school-room, worrying over lessons. What a pretty hat you've got! Oh, dear, I wish I were grown up like you, and could wear and do just what I liked!"

Kyra stifled a sigh as she thought of her thralldom.

"Do you think you would be any the happier?" she said, gently.

"Why, rather!" exclaimed May, "but I sha'n't have to wait very long; and then you will see! You and I will spend nearly all our time together. But, there I am! running away with the idea that you'll want me. Oh, I hope you will; but, perhaps, you'll be like Lance, who doesn't care to come for a walk with me. I don't know what has come to him lately; he is so—so pre-occupied and absent-minded; he doesn't seem to want any company, but goes off mooning by himself. Here's the stream. Doesn't it look deliciously cool? Why, there's Lance fishing! How selfish of him; but how like a man! Let's pretend we don't see him, Kyra! We'll get behind these trees. Come along! He's going the other way."

But Lance had been watching too keenly for them to escape him, and presently he turned and sauntered down-stream towards them.

The girls had seated themselves on a boulder, and May, intent on watching Lance, didn't see the blush with which Kyra was struggling.

"He's coming down. Well, let him. Now you'll see the way to treat a man when he's behaved badly," she said, pursing her lips resolutely.

Lance came upon them with a faint start of surprise, and, nodding casually to May, who stared before her with icy disregard of him, raised his cap to Kyra.

"Good-morning, Miss Jermyn," he said; "lovely morning for a walk. You've chosen a nice place for a rest."

"Yes, a nice, quiet place for a chat, a *confidential* chat," said May, with emphasis. "We came here because we thought we shouldn't be disturbed. We had no idea you were here. But don't let us stop your fishing, pray."

"They're not rising this morning," said Lance, setting his rod against the bank and leaning beside it, as if he meant to stop there for the remainder of his life.

May looked at the stream, on which the trout were snapping at the flies, and then stared at him indignantly.

"You mean you can't catch them," she retorted, scornfully. "I always told you that you threw too heavy a fly. Why, the merest novice could fill a basket this morning."

"Could they?" he said, with a yawn. "You make a mistake, my child; they're rising short. If you don't believe me, you try. I'll give you half a crown for every fish you get, notwithstanding your impudence."

May swallowed the bait with satisfactory promptitude, and, springing to her feet, seized the rod.

"Oh, do you mind if I try for a few minutes, Kyra?" she cried. "I want to teach my cousin that he doesn't know everything about fly-fishing. Mind, Lance, I'll have those half-crowns!"

"You catch your fish first before you cook 'em," he retorted in a tone that he knew would send her flying to the stream; then, almost before she was out of hearing, he sank into her seat and bent towards Kyra.

"I must be quick," he said in a low voice, his eyes fixed on hers eagerly. "I went to London—I've got a special license."

She regarded him intently, her brows drawn straight, her lips parted slightly, her breath coming quickly.

"I don't know what that is," she said in a low but perfectly steady voice.

"It's a license that lets you be married at any time, any place," he explained in the same tone.

She inclined her head and looked away from him, as if she were considering this statement.

"We could walk into the church here, or send for the parson to this spot, or to any house, and he would have to marry us. But we couldn't do that. I've been thinking it over; we must go farther from home. You could not go to London?"

"Oh, no, no! It is impossible!" she breathed.

"No; I thought not. Well, then, see! You know Benstead? No? It is the market, manufacturing town, about ten miles from here; it is a large place; there are ever so many churches, in the most crowded part of the town, where they have too many marriages to notice or remember any particular one. Do you see?"

"Yes," she said, with her level brows still knit.

"They don't know me there, they wouldn't know you: we could be married quietly, and no one, barring the parson, and the pew-opener and sexton, would be any the wiser. Of course, we should dress quietly, and just try and look like the people of the place—a clerk and—and—"

"Governess, shopkeeper," she said, thoughtfully.

"That's it," he assented, hurriedly. "Get one, May?" for May had taken off her tam-o'-shanter and waved it to attract his attention, and had held up a glittering trout. "We shall have another minute or two; she'll stick to it until she has got some more. We can arrange to meet there."

Kyra shook her head.

"I could not go—they would know—come with me to the station."

"Very well, then. I'll drive you there. The day you decide to go, I'll have the dog-cart."

"No, no; we should be seen," she said, flushing. "I will meet you there; I will get to the station in some way or other."

He gazed at the clear eyes, the steady lips, admiringly, with an adoring, loving admiration.

"How brave you are!" he whispered.

"Brave! If you knew— But go on, please."

"It is for you to fix the day," he said. "When shall it be? There is a train at eleven, and one back at half-past twelve. It would give us time, I think. I've never been married before."

The old joke passed her by unnoticed.

"The day," she murmured, deep in thought—"the day—I must let you know—"

"Yes, it shall be when you please. It's for you to decide—What's this?" He broke off suddenly. "There is someone coming. Don't move—stay here. They cannot see you."

He sprang up and went towards a groom who was coming across the field. The man had a telegram in his hand.

"Just come, sir. Mr. Williams said you ought to have it at once; and, knowing you had gone fishing, I—"

"Right! Very thoughtful of you, George," said Lance, taking the telegram, and slipping half-a-crown into the man's hand.

He waited until the man had gone some distance, then he went back to Kyra with the telegram in his hand.

"I am afraid to open it," he said, as she regarded him with grave interrogation.

He tore the envelope open, and had hard work to suppress a cry as he read the telegram. He held it out to her.

"You see!" he said. "The War Office has decided for it. I have to join my brigade at once. I must start by to-morrow's boat. There will just be time to— Quick! May is

coming! You will meet me at the station at Benstead by the eleven train?"

She raised her head and looked at him steadily; she was holding her breath; but at last she said in a low voice:

"Yes, I will meet you."

CHAPTER IX.

STRANGELY enough, Kyra slept soundly that night, after she had once got to sleep. She lay awake for a little while, thinking of the ordeal of the morrow, planning how she could get away for so many hours; she thought also of the generous young fellow who had consented to the marriage and had so simply arranged it; but there was nothing warmer than gratitude in her thoughts of him. If she had loved him in the very least, she would not have fallen to sleep so easily—she would have lain awake thrilling with the manifold anticipations of the future that was opening upon her.

When she came down to breakfast she wore a black, tailor-made suit which might have been worn by a governess or one of the female clerks who now fill the post- and public-offices, to the exclusion of the men—who, it is to be presumed, will ultimately be driven to taking in washing or going into domestic service as "generals" or plain cooks—and, in response to Mrs. Froyte's questioning glance, said:

"I am going for a long walk over the downs, this morning."

Stracey entered the room as she spoke, pausing at the door to fling the end of his cigarette into a vase in the hall—he was one of those men who smoke cigarettes while they are dressing, and on every possible and almost impossible occasion—and looked at her, with his soft smile.

"I was going to propose a ride, Kyra," he said.

"Yes; it would be very nice," she said, with a calmness and composure which astonished herself; "but I would rather walk this morning."

"So be it," he said, promptly. "And we will start early—shall we?"

Her heart beat fast with resentment rather than with nervousness.

"Yes," she assented; "it would be a pity to waste so fine a morning."

"I'm not so sure that it is going to continue fine," remarked James Froyte, looking up from his plate and then

swiftly down again. "There are some clouds over the Head—"

"My father is always pessimistic, you know," said Stracey, with the suggestion of a sneer with which he nearly always met any remark of his father's. "We'll trust our luck, Kyra, eh?" he added, in a tone of affectionate familiarity that made Kyra's resentment burn hotly; but she smiled an assent, and the breakfast proceeded in the usual silence, the two men engrossed with their newspapers, and Mrs. Froyte gazing fixedly at her plate.

"Just give me time to answer a letter or two, and I'll be ready to join you, Kyra," said Stracey.

"Please do not hurry," she responded, casually and indifferently; but, as the door of the smoking-room closed behind him, she went up to her room, and, hurriedly putting on her hat and jacket, came down again.

"Will you tell Stracey that I will go for a little stroll while he is writing? I will come back for him; but, if I do not, ask him to come after me. I will go towards the glen."

Mrs. Froyte inclined her head.

"Perhaps he would go with you now—" she began, hesitatingly; but Kyra said, quickly:

"Oh, please, don't disturb him; it will not matter." And, forcing herself to linger, left the house by the end of the terrace which the smoking-room window did not overlook. She walked slowly through the garden, and went in the direction she should take if she were making the glen her destination; but, when the rising ground shut her from the view of anyone in the house, she turned and went towards the station, rapidly forecasting the trend of events: Stracey would wait, say, half or three-quarters of an hour for her. He would sit and smoke and lounge over the newspaper, and would not put on his boots and hat until he had decided that she was not coming. Then he would start to follow her and certainly would go as far as the glen before he turned back, under the impression that he had missed her. All this would take another hour and a half; and long before that she would be at Benstead.

She reached the station and was not disappointed at not seeing Lance le Breton there; indeed, she was rather relieved; for there would be a certain amount of danger if they were seen travelling by the same train.

There were several passengers on the station, but there was no one she knew; and neither the booking-clerk nor the porters recognised her, for, since she had arrived, late at night, at Holmby, she had not been to the station. She took a

third-class return-ticket, and, as the train pulled up at the platform, got quickly, but with no appearance of hurry, into an empty carriage.

Several of the other passengers followed her, but she turned her face to the window as if to look at the view, and she had drawn her veil—rather a thick one for the summer—almost completely over her face. Her fellow-travellers were farmers and farm-labourers going to Benstead market, and, beyond an indifferent glance at her, displayed no interest in the quiet girl in the black dress.

When the train stopped at Benstead—it was the next station to Holmby—Kyra waited until the other passengers had alighted, and then went quickly from the carriage and down the wooden stairs into the road beneath.

Her heart leapt—with satisfaction, not with love—at the sight of the tall figure, with the straight, flat shoulders, which was standing by the arch-way, and she was crossing to him at once; but he made a slight, warning gesture with his hand, indicating that she was to remain on her side of the road, and he set off slowly for the town.

It was not until they reached the High Street, crowded by market-people, that he crossed and joined her.

"I thought it better that we should not meet, so evidently by appointment, close to the station, where we should be noticed, but here in the midst of the crowd," he said.

He had not held out his hand, but only raised his hat; and the hand she had ready for him fell to its place at her side. She nodded and looked at him comprehendingly.

"Yes; I understand. It was very wise, thoughtful—"

"Are you quite well?" he broke in: he seemed in a state of suppressed excitement; his handsome, almost boyish face was flushed one moment and pale the next; his frank eyes were glowing one instant, the next grave and overcast. "Did you have any difficulty in—getting away? I have been imagining all sorts of things—imagining only, for I know nothing—you have told me nothing."

She look up at him swiftly.

"No: I—cannot: and you promised not to ask?" she said, in a low voice.

"I know—I know! I'm not asking!" he returned, promptly. "But I can't tell you how anxious I have been while I have been waiting. I came over by the early train. I was here yesterday evening and hunted up a church. It is St. Jude's. An old-fashioned place in a poor part of the town. I saw the verger—what do you think of him?—"



gave him notice. There are no end of marriages there generally—every day, I mean; but there are none to-day, and no other service. There isn't likely to be anybody in the church: it's market-day, and everybody will be too busy for sauntering in."

"You have thought of everything," she said, in a voice whose sweetness thrilled him. "You seem to have forgotten nothing: ah, that is the best of being a man!"

She sighed and looked before her with preoccupied eyes as they threaded their way through the crowd. Just before them was walking a young farmer and a girl, probably engaged; the young man, taking advantage of the throng, slipped his arm round the girl's waist, and, for a moment, pressed her to his side. Lance saw the little pantomime, the swift, irrepressible embrace, and glanced, with a thrill of sympathy, at the beautiful face beside him. But Kyra had not seen or had been too absorbed to notice the two sweethearts and the young man's action, and Lance's swift, appealing glance fell back as if from a polished shield.

"It is a narrow street at the bottom of this one," he said, in a subdued voice. "I thought it best to walk—there are no cabs here, of course, and a fly from one of the hotels—"

She made a gesture of comprehension and assent.

"Much better," she said. "No one will notice us in this crowd; and everyone seems so busy, so taken up with his own affairs. Ah, this is quieter," she added, as they turned into the less frequented street. "There is so much I want to say," she went on, after a pause. "But I seem so confused, so bewildered, that I cannot arrange my thoughts."

Lance glanced at her with some surprise: she appeared to him so calm and self-possessed, to even a marvellous extent, seeing that he was conscious of a wild and tumultuous beating of the heart and a swift surging of the blood in every vein.

"You will be able to tell me after the—the ceremony," he said, a little hurriedly; "there is no time now; we are a few minutes late as it is. Here is the church."

She looked up at it in a dazed kind of fashion.

"It is very old," she murmured, mechanically, "and very dilapidated. I hope no one will be there!"

"Wait one moment; I will see," he said, and he went in.

She stood on the threshold and gazed vacantly at a cat—probably in search of the proverbial church mouse—who stared back at her in a dazed way—and he came out again almost instantly.

"There is no one there excepting the verger and pew-

opener—the clergyman has not arrived yet: they say he is always late—”

“Oh, if he should have forgotten!” Kyra exclaimed, under her breath.

Lance’s heart leapt, but sank again as he noted the total absence of any sentiment except fear in her tone.

“Oh, he won’t forget: here he comes, I suppose,” he said, as a clergyman, bent double with age, came up the steps peering at them with lack-luster, incurious eyes.

Kyra drew a breath of relief, and the two passed into the church. As they did so, the sky, which had been clouding over, became very heavy, and they heard the distant roll of thunder.

“There is going to be a storm: we are in shelter just in time,” said Lance, trying to speak lightly, but conscious of the tremor in his voice.

The pew-opener—the typical pew opener with an obvious “front,” in colour and texture as unlike human hair as it could possibly be—came waddling towards them.

“Good-morning, miss; *good-morning*, sir! Air you the couple as is going to be—”

“Yes, yes,” said Lance, impatiently. “Is it all ready? We’re in a hurry—I mean, we don’t want to wait!”

“Yes, sir. And quite natural it is, to be sure! I’ll go and see if Mr. Jackson’s got his surplus on.”

“It’s quite dark,” said Lance to Kyra, in the whisper in which we are accustomed to pitch our voices in a sacred edifice.

As he spoke, the verger hobbled up, looking, in his musty gown, as if he had spent the whole of his long existence in it, and had never left the gloomy, grimy building.

“P’raps you’d like to have the lamps lighted—they near the altar, at any rate, sir?” he suggested, in a wheezy voice. “It’s what you might call depressing for a weddin’.”

Lance glanced questioningly at Kyra, but she shook her head, and he said, hurriedly:

“No, no!”

The bent figure of the old clergyman, in a dingy surplice, toiled slowly from the vestry with a book in his hand, and the verger signed to Lance to follow with Kyra.

Instinctively he held out his arm for her hand, and he felt it tremble as it rested, light as a fluttering bird, on his sleeve.

They stood before the altar; the clergyman began the service as if he were an automaton, set in motion and moved to speech by some mysterious agency; and in a state of dull

amazement—was she just beginning to realise what she was doing?—Kyra found herself being married.

Lance looked straight before him with the desperate, unnatural, and inexpressibly grim calm peculiar to the wretched bridegroom; but presently he looked at her; and his heart—so full of love for her—was wrung with infinite pity for her. She was deadly white, and there was a strange, questioning, wondering expression in the beautiful eyes, the look of a bird that is being driven by some cruel Fate out into the terror and stress of a winter's storm.

"Don't—don't be afraid!" he caught himself murmuring above the drone, drone of the aged clergyman.

"The ring, sir. Got the ring?" the verger whispered, huskily, behind his hand. "It's the right time now."

Lance's heart leapt with fear that he might have forgotten it: but it was there, right enough, in his waistcoat pocket, where he had carefully stowed it, and he took it out.

"Give me your hand," he said to Kyra, in a low voice, a voice thrilling with a strong man's pity and love, for she was standing like a statue, as if insensible of sound and sight. She started and extended her hand, and he helped her to remove the glove which she had forgotten to take off—which she did not know she would be required to remove. The soft, white hand was as cold as death; and the longing to enfold it in his, to warm it in his breast, swept over him like a wave.

He slipped the ring on—strangely enough, it fitted fairly well—and instinctively retained her hand: was it his fancy, or did it really grow warmer and more life-like in his clasp?

Then, as if in a dream, he saw the verger open the rail-gate for the clergyman, and, still in a dream-like state, followed him into the vestry. Kyra still gazed straight before her. In her ears were ringing the words, "Wilt thou have this man to be thy wedded husband? Wilt thou obey him, serve him, love, honour, and keep him in sickness and in health?"

Her husband! And the promise she had made: to love him, to cherish, to obey! In her terror of Stracey Froyte, in her desperate determination to baulk him, to escape from him, she had not for a moment thought of the vow she would have to make. She had never been present at a marriage-ceremony, had not read the service.

"To love, honour, obey!" The words seemed to be reverberating through the dark, gloomy church, with its musty, well-nigh overpowering smell of dry rot and mouldering cushions.

The clergyman's dry, monotonous voice aroused her.

"Ah, yes, yes," he was droning, listlessly. "The license—yes; ah, a special? Yes, yes; I remember—they told me. Ought to have asked for it first, eh? Ha, ha!" he chuckled, with senile amusement. "Only a formality: sure to be all right. People not in such a hurry to be married nowadays as to be guilty of any irregularity. Ah, yes, yes; quite right! Verger, the register, please. Yes, yes! You sign your name here—no, here. Evident you have not been married before. He, he!"

He chuckled again over the hoary, old joke, and shuffled out of his surplice as Kyra and Lance wrote their names. He wrote his firmly enough—it is not often a man's signature is shaky—but, for a moment or two, the page swam before Kyra's eyes, and she put up her hand to them with a gesture of blind helplessness. Lance laid his hand on her arm: he could not speak, for the sight of her distress, so sudden, so unexpected, after her wonderful calm and composure, brought a lump to his throat; and at his touch her courage seemed to come back to her, and she wrote her name firmly, steadily, and, raising her eyes to his, forced a smile.

He smiled and nodded back to her; then, hearing the verger mumbling something behind him, said, cheerfully, "Oh, ah; yes, yes; of course," and got out his purse.

He paid the fees, tipped the two fossils—too liberally, of course—and taking Kyra on his arm, led her out of the church.

It was still raining, though the sky was gradually clearing. Neither of them had brought an umbrella, and Lance looked round him uncertainly. A coffee-shop sign hanging from a house in the narrow street caught his eye, and, with a sudden idea, he said:

"We'll go over there—there is time—just a little time."

She said nothing, and they hurried across to the place. It was small and insignificant, just a quiet, country coffee-house, but clean and neat; and a respectable-looking woman came forward to meet them.

"Some coffee, tea, anything," said Lance.

She glanced at them and then at the church opposite with a quick, comprehensive eye, then demurely led them to a small room.

"In here, sir, if you please. You won't be so likely to be disturbed; indeed, nobody's likely to come in: it's not our busy time yet awhile."

She closed the door after them, and Lance stood looking at Kyra's pale face and downcast eyes.



"You are not—frightened now?" he said, rather huskily. "You were in the church—the vestry; I saw. There is no need; I mean," he went on, hurriedly, "they are not likely to remember you—us; they have so many marriages; it was so dark—almost like night, wasn't it? And they were all so old and—and blind, and stupid, like three old bats. Oh, you need not be anxious."

"I am not," she said, in a low voice, so sweet and sad, so gentle that his heart was racked by the desire to take her in his arms and comfort and soothe her. And he had the right to soothe her—the right!

"I do not know what came over me," she said, as if anxious to explain. "It was not exactly fear, nervousness; but I don't think I have ever thought of the—of the meaning, the importance."

"Well, it's too late now for regret," he said, with a smile, but with something of intensity in his deep, musical voice. "We are married now, we are man and wife—yes; you are my wife!"

There was a note in his voice which, if she had been less innocent, less absorbed in her sense of peril and escape, would have brought the colour to her face; but its colour did not change.

"Yes, and I am so grateful that I cannot find words, cannot tell you," she said, her lovely eyes resting on his with deep gratitude, with a wondering gratitude in them.

"Oh, that's all right," he said. "We made the—the bargain, didn't we? and—"

The woman came in with some tea and bread and butter and cake; put it down, and as quietly left them again.

"Will you have some tea? Ah, yes; please do! You have been upset— Good Lord! it has been no end of a trying time for you; and I can't tell you how much I admire your courage— Will you pour it out, or shall I?"

In the end he poured out a cup for her and handed it to her. He noticed that her hand did not tremble.

As she was taking the cup, her eye caught his eye fixed on the wedding-ring. She looked at it and started.

"I—I cannot keep this on," she said.

"N-o, no; of course not," he assented—reluctantly, but with an attempt at a matter-of-fact air.

She turned it round and round, then drew it off slowly, and laid it on the table.

"Will you keep it?" she asked.

"If—if you like," he said, holding out his hand.

She put the ring into it slowly.

"And—and there is this: they gave it me as we were coming away."

She took a folded paper from her pocket.

"The marriage-certificate," he said. "You'll keep that, of course."

She considered for a moment.

"Shall I? I think I'd better not. It may be found. And no one is to know—no one *must* know—of our marriage, unless—"

She stopped.

"That's all right," he said as before. "I'll keep it. I'll take care of it. Don't be afraid."

She gave him the certificate, her eyes expressing faint surprise.

"Why should I be afraid?" she asked.

"Oh—nothing," he replied. "The wife generally holds on to the thing: but it doesn't matter. We're married all right, there's no fear of that. Yes—"

Some impulse, the fierce, blind impulse of a passion beaten back by an icy barrier, and falling bleeding and wounded at every repulse, prompted him to add:

"Oh, yes; you're my wife; why, if I liked I could force you to come with me—"

She gazed at him breathlessly, the exquisite colour glowing in her face, and her beauty, enhanced by the touch of feeling, piled fuel on his fire.

"But—but—you would not, will not?" she faltered.

"Why not?" He laughed, but the laugh was harsh and high-strung. "What if I were to say that—that you belong to me; if I were to say that I couldn't part with you—"

He drew nearer to her, his eyes shining, his lips apart.

—"That I loved you too well—"

She shrank back, and put up her hands, for instinctively the shadow of the kiss for which his parched lips were clamouring fell upon her terror-stricken spirit.

"No, no! You cannot! You do not! You—you are jesting. Besides, your promise, your oath. Ah, you have not forgotten—you—you are a gentleman, a *gentleman*, not like—like some other men! And I—I trusted you!"

CHAPTER X.

THAT "You are a gentleman, I trusted you!" struck home. Lance caught his breath and shut his teeth tightly.



"That's so," he said, huskily. "I—I was nearly forgetting it: thank you for reminding me. I might say, as an excuse for my roughness, that I am also a man. "But never mind," he went on, hurriedly. "I won't—offend again."

He averted his eyes from the lovely face, the pure, pleading orbs, as if the temptation "to offend" still assailed him. He had put the ring in his waistcoat-pocket and the certificate in his breast-pocket: there was a pause. Kyra stood with one ungloved hand pressed on the table; her brows were knit; she seemed to be thinking, considering.

"There is so much I want to say," she said at last, "and there is so little time—I suppose I, we, must be going presently? I wanted to speak of the money."

Lance started slightly; winced, indeed; but he tried to conceal his resentment.

"What about it?" he asked.

She glanced at him shyly, nervously.

"As I told you, I think I have some money, that I am rich; but I am not sure—"

"I don't want to talk about the money," Lance broke in, rather curtly.

"Ah, but we must!" she said, gently but insistently. "It is your right; it was part of the—the bargain, the arrangement."

"There you are wrong," he said. "I didn't marry you because you might happen to be rich."

She opened her eyes on him and looked troubled; then:

"Why did you do so?" she asked.

Lance flushed to the roots of his hair, and his eyes began to glow again dangerously. He could scarcely restrain himself from saying:

"I jumped at the chance of marrying you because I loved you—loved you the first time I saw you. I thought it better for me that you should be my wife in name only, rather than that there should be a chance of any other man getting you. I love you so deeply, so madly, that at this moment I have hard work to keep the hungry wolf that rages within me from springing on you and claiming you."

But instead of saying this, he said, with a forced smile:

"Well, let's call it a whim of mine, a fancy."

Her eyes opened still wider, and she regarded him doubtfully.

"A whim! Oh, surely not! I thought it was because—you were poor—"

He crimsoned hotly at the unconsciously cruel speech.

"You don't appear to have a very high opinion of me," he said, rather thickly, "to think that I would sell myself—"

It was now her turn to flush, and the trouble deepened in her eyes.

"No, no! Oh, I beg your pardon. I didn't mean that. I mean—I didn't think what my words meant. Will you forgive me? If you did not marry me just as a business arrangement, you must have done it because you wished to help me, and only for that reason."

Her lips began to tremble and her eyes were downcast.

Lance thrust his hands in his pockets and clenched them there: he was so sorely tempted to fling his arms round her, to crush her to his heart, to say: "Bother all the reasons: I have married you—you are my wife. I want you, and you must come to me!"

"Suppose we let the reasons alone," he said, with an affectation of a matter-of-fact air. "Perhaps you'd better tell me about the money; though, so far as it concerns me, I don't feel any keen interest in it; but you are my wife"—he tried to speak with an air of levity, even of jocularity—"and what concerns you concerns me."

"Thank you," she said, with a meekness the sweetness of which almost maddened him. "As I said before, about this money I can only conjecture. My father may have died rich, or he may have left little or nothing; I do not know. He never spoke to me of money—in India women have nothing whatever to do with it. He always seemed rich—but I do not know for certain."

Lance nodded.

"I can quite understand," he said. "Here in England men do not often speak to their women-folk about money. But the Froytes are your guardians, aren't they? They'd know: you could ask them."

"Yes, they'd know, she said, slowly, hesitatingly. "I could ask them: but—for reasons—I do not wish to do so. I would rather find out in some other way; and I will do so. If it should be as I think and hope—if I am rich—you will take half the money?"

He stared at the table-cloth with a frown.

"Time enough to talk about that when you have found out," he said.

"How shall I let you know?—where shall I write to you?" she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders regretfully.

"I shall be moving about. I don't know where the regi-

ment will go; I doubt if anyone knows. But you might write there; it will be our head-quarters for a time, at any rate," he added, taking an envelope from his pocket and writing on it.

She took the envelope, studied the address as if she were committing it to memory, and then tore the envelope into little pieces.

"And I can write to you?" he asked.

She looked up at him with quick alarm.

"No, no; oh, no," she replied, quickly. "You must not write to me; it would not be safe. Do you not remember our—our bargain? I must write to you because—because of the money; but I will only do so once. We are to be as strangers to each other, as if we had not met, certainly as if we were not—married."

The alarm in her face, her faltering accents, stilled the storm of passion raging in his breast.

"I have not forgotten," he said, in a low voice, which he kept as steady as possible. "When we part now we part as strangers or, at most, mere acquaintances. That was our understanding. I gave my promise, swore—and I'll keep it. As you say, you trusted me—I quite understood what I was doing."

Notwithstanding his efforts to appear calm and unmoved, his voice broke and he turned away in search of his hat. Kyra watched him with the same look of trouble, doubt, and faint surprise. She began to put on her glove, but stopped.

"It must be time to go," she said, in a low voice.

Lance gave a little start, got his hat, and straightened himself.

"We'd better say 'good-bye' here," she said, and she held out her hand.

He took it. His was so hot that it seemed to burn her; but hers was so cool that it seemed to chill him. He held her hand in a slowly tightening grasp that crushed the delicate fingers together, and his eyes sought hers with a last, fierce appeal in them.

"Good-bye!" he said, hoarsely. "I won't ask you not to forget me; it's not likely you'll do that; but I will ask you, if you should be in any trouble, if you should want me, to forget the bargain we made, to forget that we arranged to part, to be nothing to each other, and to write to me, to send for me. I will come from the other end of the world, through fire and water—"

"I promise," she said. "Oh, how can I thank you for all that you have done for me, for this last offer!"

He smiled, rather a ghastly smile, and his face grew pale.

"You don't owe me any thanks, Miss Jermyn," he said. Then he started, and his hand closed still more tightly on hers. "'Miss Jermyn!' You are Mrs. Lance le Breton! You are my wife! It's usual for husband and wife to kiss each other at parting—especially when they are parting for life! Will you be offended—will you let me kiss you, for the first—and perhaps for the last—time?"

The blood flooded her face, her lips trembled, and her eyes were downcast; then she grew pale, even white, and she raised her eyes to his with what seemed resignation and reproach.

"You shall—if—if you wish it," she murmured, almost inaudibly.

He put his arm round her, and drawing her towards him, bent his head so that his lips almost touched hers. Then, suddenly, he released her and drew back; released her almost fiercely.

"No!" he said, with a laugh—a bitter laugh. "I won't take what you would give unwillingly. I won't stand on my rights. I'll remember my promise. As you say, I am a gentleman, and you trust me. Good-bye!"

He turned away, so that he might not see her, so that he might fight the temptation which threatened to overwhelm him. She clasped the hand that he had released—her fingers were tingling from the embrace of his—her heart was fluttering with a sensation that puzzled and half frightened her, and, almost unconsciously, she moved towards him. Had she reached him, had he turned at that moment and seen her face, all would have been well; there would have been no parting, at least in the sense in which they had bargained; but he still stood staring out of the window with eyes which saw nothing. She checked her forward movement, and, lowering her veil, murmured once more, "Good-bye!" and passed out.

Lance heard the door close softly behind her. The slight sound seemed to arouse him from a spell and he sprang to the door with "Kyra!" on his lips; but as he caught the handle, he checked himself, and, with something like an oath, turned back, and sinking into a chair, flung out his arms upon the table and dropped his head upon them. The pain that racked his heart clouded his brain and made him insensible to everything but the fact that he was married to the most lovely, the sweetest creature, on earth; and that he

had let her go, was parted from her forever without speaking one word of his love, without touching her lips with one kiss.

How long he remained in this confused condition he did not know; he was aroused by the woman of the house coming in. She looked surprised to find him alone and somewhat startled by his haggard face. He paid her the modest sum she demanded and went—one might almost write, staggered—into the street. The fresh air made him giddy. There was a public-house at the corner and he went in and asked for some brandy.

The bar-maid gave him some, and he drank it off and asked for another and another, which he drank as rapidly.

"Been doing some good business this morning?" said the bar-maid, with an ingratiatory smile.

Lance stared at her, then burst into a laugh, a wild, mocking laugh.

"Oh, yes, yes, very important business!" he said, and, paying for the brandy, he went outside.

He found himself in the broader and more crowded thoroughfare, and as he made his way along it he looked round instinctively for Kyra: he could not realize that he had lost her forever. But there was no sign of her. A kind of fierce despair possessed him. A man happened to jostle against him: with a movement of his strong shoulder Lance sent the unfortunate individual spinning against a shop front. The man remonstrated, Lance turned upon him savagely, and there would have been a row; but at that moment a dog-cart that was coming down the street pulled up at the edge of the pavement and May's remarkably clear voice called out:

"Lance!"

Lance went towards her with his pale, haggard face and somewhat uncertain gait. She looked down at him with surprise and something of concern.

"Why, what are you doing here, Lance?" she asked. "We didn't know where you had gone so mysteriously. And your last day, too!"

"I—I've been buying things," he responded; "but I've finished now."

"Then jump up and drive home with me," she said.

He got up beside her, and she regarded him curiously and a little anxiously.

"How pale and ill you look, Lance," she said. "And—what a smell of brandy there is!"

"Yes," he said, grimly. "I've been having some: I've had the toothache."

"Oh, poor Lance!" she exclaimed, pityingly. "And just starting on that journey, too! No; I'll drive. Why, your hand is trembling; you are all of a shake."

"Yes; had it badly," he mumbled.

They drove home, and all the way May glanced at him from time to time anxiously: he seemed so different to the light-hearted Lance she knew and loved; he seemed to be in a kind of dream. She wondered how much brandy he had had.

When they reached the Hall he helped her down—she sprang, and he caught her in his arms as he used to do when they were boy and girl—and hurried to his room. His port-manteau was ready packed; in fact, it was almost time for him to start. His kinsfolk were already gathered in the hall to say "Good-bye!" Lady Adderley gave him a cup of tea with the air of one bestowing an icy blessing with it. The earl, leaning on his gold-headed stick, grunted complaints and regrets at intervals. Arthur came out of his sick-room to say "Good-bye," and impressed upon Lance the necessity of wearing a flannel band round his waist.

"A most important thing, my dear Lance. And be sure you take a supply of quinine tabloids. You might also try Bluggins's specific for malarial fever. I am told that it is invaluable."

"I am d——d sorry you're going, Lance," grunted the earl. "Things are coming to a pretty pass when a Breton is obliged to join a d——d volunteer brigade! But you'll be back some time or other—if you're not shot, which you very probably will be."

"Lance will, at any rate, have the satisfaction of knowing that he has served his country," remarked Lady Adderley, with bland callousness.

Poor Lance mumbled appropriate responses to these remarks. Presently May came down in her out-of-door things.

"I'm going to drive you to the station, Lance," she said. "I am going to see the last of you."

They started presently.

"Would you mind driving round by—by the Elms?" said Lance. "We've got time, I think."

He looked at the villa, half-hidden by the trees. There was no sign of life and no sign of Kyra. It was typical of the hideous blank in his life.

If she had appeared at a window to wave a handkerchief, to

give him the last sight of her lovely face, it would have been something: but there was no sign of her.

"You stick to your friend, Miss Jermyn, May," he said. "She's very lonely, and will be glad of a friend."

"Oh, yes," said May. "You can't tell how fond I am of her, Lance!"

"That's all right," he said. "She's worth looking after. If you write to me, I wish you'd tell me anything about her."

"I will," said May. "Oh, Lance, I am so sorry you are going! The place won't seem the same without you. Your going takes all the sunshine out of it. I wish I were a man and going with you. Think of getting rid of Miss Barlow, of seeing the world!"

"It's a poor kind of world," said poor Lance.

He was so confused, so eaten up with his thoughts of Kyra, that he scarcely knew what he was saying.

The train was at the station when they reached it; but the station-master had kept the train for so important a person as Mr. Lance le Breton. May leant over the open window of the carriage, both her hands in Lance's.

"Good-bye, Lance! Come back to us—come back to us soon! Oh, good-bye, Lance, *dear* Lance!"

The train steamed out of the station and carried Lance away from the woman who was his wife in name only.

He looked out of the window and saw May—little May—standing with her hands clasped, her bright eyes blurred with tears.

CHAPTER XL.

KYRA left the coffee-house and passed down the street quickly, her head bent, her veil drawn over her face. She was naturally somewhat agitated: after all, one does not get married every day, and marriage is an event in the life of any girl. She felt confused and bewildered, and she scarcely raised her eyes as she made her way to the station, which she reached, escaping May by the matter of a moment or two, for May drove down the High street just after Kyra had turned one of the corners.

Kyra had only a few minutes to wait before the train came up, and, when it came, she got into a third-class carriage unnoticed by the other passengers, who were few in number; for the farmers and their wives did not usually return from Benstead until late in the evening. Market-day is the one day in

the week for country folk, and they make the most of it, going in by an early train and coming out by a late one.

When the train reached Holmby, Kyra waited until the few passengers got out, and then went quickly down into the road, and, taking a narrow lane, went by a circuitous line towards the Elms. She walked quickly, but as she approached the house she slackened her pace and sauntered into the garden in a casual way; but her heart was beating fast, and it was as much as she could do to meet the enquiring gaze of Mrs. Froyte, who stood on the terrace as if she had been watching her, as she had.

"Have you missed Stracey, Kyra?" she asked.

"Yes," replied Kyra. "At least, I suppose so. Did he go to the glen?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Froyte, looking at her with timid, shifty eyes. "At least, I suppose so; I told him you were going that way."

"Then we have missed each other," said Kyra, with a shrug of her shoulders. "I am sorry. I'll go up to my room. It is very hot. Please tell Stracey when he comes in that I am sorry I missed him."

She drew a long breath of relief when she had reached her room. It was evident that Mrs. Froyte, who was always watching her, did not suspect that she, Kyra, had left the neighbourhood. Stracey was, no doubt, wandering about the Glen and would conclude that he had missed her. All was well.

She took off her things slowly, pausing every now and then and looking vacantly before her, as if she were oppressed by thought. The feeling of confusion and bewilderment was passing away, but in its place a strange sadness was stealing over her. She could scarcely realise that she was married; the whole thing seemed a dream. And yet she was married and Lance le Breton was her husband. It was true that he was only her husband in name, that they had parted, perhaps forever; but he was her husband in the eyes of the law—in the eyes of God, too; for were they not married in a church, by a clergyman? Lance's face and voice haunted her. There had been something in the expression of his eyes, in his voice, which she did not understand. It seemed to her that he was sorry to part with her, that he was inclined to claim her as a wife, as a man claims a wife under an ordinary marriage. He had asked her permission to kiss her. How strange that was! Was it a freak, a whim, on his part?

Why should he have asked her? He quite understood the

arrangement and the bargain between them. He had been annoyed, too, when she had spoken of the money. Now, why should he have been so annoyed? It was only fair that he should receive the benefit of the arrangement.

She sat on the bed as she brushed her hair slowly—it was beautiful hair, and most girls would have been proud of it; but Kyra had never given a thought to it—and allowed her mind to dwell upon that strange scene in the church, the almost stranger scene in the coffee-house.

How handsome he had looked, as he had stood confronting her and asking for that kiss as if it were his right; and how nobly, how chivalrously he had checked himself, even when his lips were almost touching hers.

She thought of it all, going over every detail, with a strange sensation of regret and remorse. Somehow, even in her innocence, she felt as if she had got the better of him in the bargain they had made, as if she had in some way defrauded him. After all, had she not got the better of the bargain? She was safe; Stracey Froyte could not marry her, for she was married already; and if she died, any money that was coming to her could not come to the Froytes. She had attained her object.

But what about Lance le Breton—the handsome, frank-eyed, frank-voiced young fellow who had married her? He was tied to her for life now—no, not tied to her—and yet he was, for he could not marry again; and the benefit he was to receive was quite problematical. She might be rich or she might not; if she were not, he would emphatically be the loser.

She stretched out her left hand and looked at it curiously. The wedding-ring had rested upon it—the ring which was the outward and visible sign of her wifedom. She had taken it from her finger and given it to him; she had given him the marriage-certificate; she had nothing about her to prove the fact of her marriage, to impress even her own consciousness with it.

“But I am safe now,” she murmured to herself. “I am married; I am beyond Stracey Froyte’s reach.”

She ought to have been satisfied with the reflection; but Lance le Breton’s—her husband’s—face and voice haunted her, and she flung her hands before her eyes to shut them out.

“You are my wife—if I like to claim you!” The words rang in her ears. She wondered what she would have done if he had so claimed her. What would have happened? He would have taken her with him; she would have been his—

The mere idea sent the blood to her head and again brought down confusion and bewilderment.

Mrs. Froyte's voice came up the stairs.

"Are you not coming to lunch, Kyra?"

She went down. Mrs. Froyte was in the room, but her husband and Stracey were absent.

"Stracey has not returned yet," said Mrs. Froyte, with a swift glance at Kyra. Everything is half cold. I can't think where he is; he must be looking for you."

Stracey had gone off to the glen in search of Kyra. He had started quite complacently, with the perpetual cigarette between his lips. She had not accepted him for her husband; she had asked for time to think it over; but he told himself that when a woman hesitates she is lost; and he had so much faith in his own appearance and influence that he regarded Kyra's capitulation as certain, as a mere matter of time.

He smiled to himself as he went towards the glen; for the future seemed roseate and brilliant, and in sharp contrast to his past. For Stracey Froyte had a "past."

The Froytes had been poor until Mr. Jermyn, Kyra's father, had returned to Europe; and Stracey had been thrown upon his own resources. What they were, even his own father did not know, for Stracey was of a secretive nature and was instinctively given to concealment.

He had launched himself upon the world at quite an early age; had spent some of his years in England and some on the Continent, and had pursued a devious and a dubious way until his father, announcing Mr. Jermyn's death, had summoned him home.

Now, to no man is the prospect of monetary ease more precious than to him who has struggled with poverty and that lack of pence which, according to the best authorities, is the greatest curse under which men can labour. By his marriage with Kyra, Stracey Froyte would come into the command of a vast fortune, an income which would not only place him above want, but seat him amongst those who, by virtue of gold, rule the world.

He thought of all this as he went towards the glen. He recalled his shady past—so shady that even his own father was not aware of it. To do him justice, it must be said that at the start he had endeavoured to fight his way honestly; but though honesty may be the best policy, Stracey Froyte had discovered that it is a policy which takes a long time to run; and he soon abandoned it.

In sundry bar-parlours and billiard-rooms, in the crowded

city lanes and alleys, he met with men of bad antecedents and doubtful presents. The young fellow with the cool head and sharp eyes was too poor to be plucked; so they took him in and made an associate of him. There were certain transactions connected with horse-racing, touting, "stumer" cheques, which had sailed very close to the wind; indeed, some members of the little gang of sharpers and men who live by their wits had put themselves within reach of the law's claws—and had been clawed; but Stracey, either by luck or astuteness, had managed to escape.

He thought of these old days as he walked towards the glen, of the many shifts he had been put to, of the difficulties in the way of getting that food and raiment without which a man cannot live. The retrospect made him shudder. But for the handling of Kyra's fortune, with the prospect of obtaining a safe command of it, he might have again been driven to such shifts for a living, to such strange bedfellows as his former poverty had compelled him to. Little wonder that he looked forward to a marriage with Kyra, to the disposal of the vast Jermyn wealth, with a feverish eagerness. And he felt, this morning, pretty sure of succeeding. She had been kind to him of late; had walked and driven with him. She had not absolutely declined his proposal. He smiled to himself and tried to forget the past, to forget his old associates, his early struggles, the shady actions with which he had been concerned. Once married to Kyra, he would be a wealthy man, beyond the reach of temptation, beyond the reach of reproach.

The glen was a hollow in the hills, about three miles from Holmby Hall. Stracey went towards it, smoking his cigarette and swinging his stick, looking round him with an air of expectancy: Kyra would no doubt be there waiting for him, and he might get a definite answer, an affirmative, to his proposal, and all would be well. What a future lay before him!

But he could see nothing of Kyra. He frowned slightly and was going to ascend one of the hills, so that he might have a better view, when he heard the sound of horses' hoofs in the road that cut across the end of the glen. He turned mechanically; and, as he did so, a man, riding a horse and leading another, came into that part of the road which opened to Stracey's view. He looked at the man, incuriously enough at first, then the blood rushed to his face; and he muttered an oath and made a movement towards a bush in the effort to conceal himself. But he was too late. The man on the horse had seen him—for the sun was shining full upon Stracey's

face—and checking his horses, he sat and stared at Stracey for a moment, then he called out:

“Hi! Hallo, there!”

Stracey stood for a moment, as if uncertain what he had better do; then, with another muttered oath, he went down the slope and up to the man.

“Why, Nolly!” he said, in his soft, slow voice. “How are you?”

The man addressed as Nolly was short and slight, indeed, scarcely above the height of a boy, and in appearance and garb looked, what he was, a horse-dealer. He was several other things besides, but horse-dealing was his avowed, respectable calling.

He was quite bald, the result of a gas-explosion which had blinded one eye, as well as depriving him of his hair. The other eye was fixed upon Stracey Froyte’s blandly smiling face with an expression of surprise, anger, and satisfaction, nicely combined. It was an eye eloquent of low cunning, and the rest of Mr. Nolly’s face matched it admirably.

“Why, it is you!” he said, with an oath. “You’re a pretty mean kind of a fellow, Black, to give your pals the slip the way you did. What do you mean by it?”

Black was the *alias* by which Stracey had been known to the gang of which Nolly was a member.

Stracey’s smile did not waver, and he replied as blandly as he had spoken before:

“I was sorry to leave you so suddenly, Nolly; but urgent business on the Continent called me away. I have only just returned, and I intended to look you up—”

“I daresay!” broke in Nolly, incredulously. “Tell that to the marines. You gave us the slip at an awkward time, though it was convenient enough for you, I daresay. I suppose you know Jorkins and Smith got landed over that little business, and if we hadn’t found a first-class counsel for them they’d have to do a bit?”

“I’m sorry,” said Stracey. “But I think I ventured to prophesy what would happen. I always told you that that business was a dangerous one. A great deal of caution is necessary in dealing with cheques.”

Nolly’s one eye regarded him curiously.

“Oh,” he said, succinctly. “You didn’t always seem to think so. You’ve dealt in cheques yourself, Mr. Black.”

Stracey looked as if he did not understand; but, for all his self-command, his lip twitched slightly; and Nolly saw it and

laughed, a curious, husky, little laugh, which was not pleasant to listen to.

"You don't seem to remember. What about that cheque you drew on Lloyds?"

Stracey smiled.

"I remember, quite well," he said. "That got through all right."

"So you may think!" retorted Nolly; "but you're wrong. It got stopped and returned. Oh, you may smile; but I know what I'm talking about; and I've every reason to know, for that cheque fell into my hands, Black; and I've got it now."

Stracey's smile wavered and his sallow face grew rather pale.

"Indeed!" he said. "That's strange. How did you manage—"

"Never you mind," said Nolly, with a nod of the head.

"I've got it, and that's all you need know."

"I shall be very pleased to redeem it," said Stracey, blandly.

"I daresay you would!" retorted Nolly. "But I haven't quite made up my mind to part with that cheque; though fifty pounds is fifty pounds."

"Ah, yes; I remember now," said Stracey. "That was the amount, I believe. Of course, I should be very pleased to pay you a fair interest." He smiled. "Even an unfair interest, if you insist upon it."

Nolly, with his head on one side, regarded him intently.

"It looks as if you was pretty flush," he said. "What are you doing down here—what's your little game?"

Stracey shrugged his shoulders and smiled, but glanced around in a casual way: Kyra might come up at any moment and find him talking to this disreputable-looking fellow.

"I've just run down for a breath of air," he said. "Just for the day. What are you doing here? Good business, I hope?"

"I've come down to pick up a horse or two," said Nolly; "and have just bought these and am going to box 'em up to London. There's a public round the bend there; better come on and have a drink."

Stracey dared not refuse.

"Certainly," he said. "Just let me go back for my stick. I left it on the hill; and I'll join you at the inn."

Nolly looked at him uncertainly for a moment, and then he said:

"Honest injun? But you wouldn't be such a fool as to

try and give me the slip, seeing as you know what I've got."

"My dear Nolly, I haven't the least idea of giving you the slip; in fact, I'm delighted to see you. I'll be at the inn almost as soon as you are."

Nolly, after another glance at him, nodded and rode on, and Stracey went back to the glen, where, in his confusion at seeing Nolly, he dropped his stick. He looked round for Kyra, and was relieved that she was not in sight. This chance meeting with his old associate was more than inconvenient. There were other matters beside the "stumer" cheque which had fallen into Nolly's possession. Stracey had flattered himself that he had cut himself clear of the gang: it was very hard that just as the prospect of a life of luxury and ease was opening out before him he should be "spotted" by one of the worst of the old gang. But he would have to go to the inn, would have to be pleasant with the man; there was no doubt of that.

He cut across the glen, looking about him cautiously as he went, and reached the rustic public-house. Mr. Nolly was leaning against the door-way, smoking a short clay and superintending the watering of his two purchases. He nodded to Stracey, and led the way into the bar-parlour, and, Stracey following, called for drinks.

"Gin used to be your old tippie, Black, eh?" he said. "Still faithful to your old love, I suppose?"

Stracey smiled and repressed a shudder. It was some time since he had sat in a bar-parlour and drunk gin-and-water with a man of Nolly's class, and this sudden revival of his old habits jarred upon him.

"Here's luck!" said Nolly. "Close the door, my gel, will you? This gentleman and I don't like draughts. Now, Black, tell us all the news."

Stracey had prepared himself for the question, and lied with a bland fluency.

"Oh, there's not much," he said. "I had a bit of luck on the Continent, and made a little money, and I'm living on that until something turns up."

"Same old diggings, I suppose?" said Nolly.

Stracey had occupied a small room in Gray's Inn: he would have to take it on again, unless he could shake this man off by purchasing the cheque.

"Yes," he said; "the same old diggings; but I haven't been there very much."

"Well, I'm glad to see you again," said Nolly; "though

you did" play it pretty low down, giving us the slip in the way you did. Why, me and Bessie couldn't half believe it, especially Bessie. You don't ask after 'er: I suppose you've forgotten 'er?"

He looked at Stracey with a mixture of anger and wistfulness, and Stracey's shifty eyes evaded the look as he replied:

"Oh, no, indeed, I haven't forgotten Miss Bessie. I've often thought of her and the pleasant times we've had together."

Nolly grunted, but as if he were reluctant to disbelieve the statement.

"Well, I wish she'd forgotten you," he said, with unflattering candour. "But I'm afraid she ain't. Look here, Black, you'd better look us up."

There was something of threat in the invitation, and Stracey's shifty glance wandered again; but he said, pleasantly enough and readily enough:

"Of course I will. You're still at the old place?"

"Yes," said Nolly. "The old shop, Whitehorse Lane, Pentonville. But you know it well enough," he added. "Many's the cup of tea and bit of supper you've had with Bessie and me there; and she ain't forgot them times, if you have."

Stracey had not forgotten them, though he would like to have done so. He had been glad enough in the old days, when he was always hard up and sometimes well-nigh penniless, to accept the hospitality of the Nollys. A vision of a little back room, overlooking the dealer's yard, with a pretty, fair-haired girl sitting at the supper-table; of the steaming supper, of the glasses of gin-and-water, and pipes and cigars that followed, rose before him at that moment. But he did not regard the vision gratefully, but rather with reluctance and dislike. His prospects had changed since he had sat with the pretty, fair-haired Bessie, who had always been so glad to see him and to sit and talk with him.

"No, indeed, I've not forgotten," he said, "and I hope soon to renew my friendship with Miss Bessie and to spend some more pleasant times at the old place."

He said it so nicely, and feigned so well, that Nolly's face cleared.

"That's the style!" he said. "That's the way I like to hear a man talk. Never go back on your old friends! I'll tell Bessie I've met with you, and that you're coming to us; and she'll be mighty pleased—though I ought not to

her away—for my gel and you was good friends, Black, weren't you?"

"The best of friends," responded Stracey, with well-assumed heartiness. "I shall be delighted to see her again and talk over old times."

He called for relays of gin-and-water and some cigars; and when they were brought, and the gin-and-water consumed, he rose and looked at his watch, and said, with an air of reluctance:

"Now, I'm afraid I must be going, Nolly. I'm sorry to say that I've got to go up to London by an earlier train than yours, or I'd go up with you."

"I didn't say what train I was going up by," said Nolly, a trifle suspiciously; "but they won't take these horses until the evening, and I like to go up with them."

"I knew that," said Stracey, easily. "And now, as regards that cheque, my dear Nolly? What would you like to part with it for? Shall we say a hundred? That will leave you a good profit, I hope."

"It would leave me a very good one," assented Nolly; but his lips came tightly together and his one eye fixed itself on Stracey's face with an expression of cunning which would have done credit to a jackdaw. "But I don't know that I'm in any hurry to part with that cheque. I've grown to be fond of it, as you might say. Anyway, we won't talk about it now; we'll put it off until we can chat it over when you drop in at Whitehorse Lane and have pot luck with us."

"Certainly," assented Stracey, with an affectation of ease and cheerfulness. "And that won't be very long for us. And now I must be off. You'll remember me to Miss Bessie, and tell her how keenly I am looking forward to seeing her?"

He gave Nolly's monkey-like paw a hearty shake and slapped him on the back once or twice in quite an affectionate way, and left the inn with a smile, as if the meeting with his old friend had been as pleasant as it had been unexpected.

But the smile died away when he had got out of sight of Nolly's eye, which he knew was watching him from the window.

The meeting was an unfortunate one and one full of peril. Fate had stretched out a hand and dragged him back into the circle of his old, disreputable life. He had thought that he had buried the past; but it had risen again and was claiming him. But for that cheque he could have disowned this man Nolly and his daughter, could have set them at defiance; but

the possession of the cheque gave Nolly a hold upon him, and he would have to temporise. Yes; he would have to go and see the girl with whom he had more than flirted. But he would have that cheque, he *must* have it, by fair means—or foul.

With the peril represented by the existence of that cheque looming over him, it was more than ever necessary that he should marry Kyra and obtain the command of the Jermyn money. With that vast sum in his possession or under his control, he could dispose of that affair of the cheque, could afford to bid a price for it which would tempt Nolly to part with it.

He reached the Elms just as lunch was over. Kyra looked up as he entered, expecting that he would be annoyed and perhaps suspicious; but he had been too much engrossed in his own affairs for suspicion or even annoyance.

“So you are here,” he said, quite pleasantly. “We missed each other. How did we manage it, I wonder? I suppose it was my fault; that I must have misunderstood your message. I hope you are not tired?”

“No,” said Kyra, with a breath of relief. She was spared the necessity of an untruthful explanation. “I am not at all tired.”

CHAPTER XII.

THE remainder of that afternoon, Kyra spent under the verandah or wandering about the garden, and endeavouring to realise that the events of the morning had actually occurred and were not the incidents of a dream.

Nothing tangible had been left to her. The very ring and certificate she had given up to Lance, and he had taken them away with him. If the ring had been on her finger and she could have touched it and turned it over; if it had even been hidden in her bosom and she could have felt it pressing against her, it would have helped her to realise that she was married, that she was Lance le Breton's wife. But she had nothing save the vivid memory of everything that had happened, of the gloomy church, the ceremony that had taken place in the darkness of the storm, of Lance's every word and look. She had dwelt upon it all, especially his last words, his plea to her to let him kiss her, until there began to creep into her bosom a vague sense of pity for him. But she would do her duty by him, she would find out about the money and would write to him.

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Fate had stretched out
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him. But for that cheo-
Nolly and his daughter.

An ordinary girl, similarly placed, would have known exactly the course to pursue. She would have known that she could go to a solicitor, any solicitor, and placing her case in his hands, would have been able to have obtained full information of her father's affairs and complete protection against any nefarious designs the Froytes might have had.

But Kyra was singularly ignorant of her own power and her own resources. She knew nothing of business; and it never occurred to her that she could gain assistance and protection by simply walking into the office of the nearest solicitor. She was half-Oriental, with all an Oriental's reliance upon those connected with her; and no other course presented itself to her than that of an appeal to Mr. Froyte.

She went up to dress, still thinking of Lance and her wedding. As a rule, she was indifferent to dress, and did not care what she wore; though her indifference was not of much moment, as her dresses happened to be well chosen and were, for the most part, of Oriental material and workmanship.

But this evening, for some reason which she would have found difficult to explain, she chose one of the handsomest of her dresses. It was of soft black silk—so soft and fine that it would almost have passed through that wedding-ring with which she had parted—and black lace. She wore some Indian pearls, which, like all her jewellery, were rare and costly—her father had purchased them at native courts, and had been a good judge of their value—and at the last moment she put on the diamond bracelet which Stracey had given her.

She surveyed herself in the glass with a feeling that was strangely compounded of satisfaction and wistfulness. She tried to remember if Mr. Lance le Breton had ever said she was pretty: she wondered if he would say so if he saw her to-night. Somehow, she wished that he could see her, that he might say so. And Lady May had told her that she was beautiful—but Lady May was an impressionable girl and had taken a fancy to her.

She wondered where Lance was at that moment. Was he thinking of her, as she was thinking of him? Was he feeling it strange that he should be her husband, as she was feeling it strange that she should be his wife? How strange it all was! Had she done right, had she acted fairly by him in depriving him of his freedom, in tying him to her, in a bondage which only death could sever?

She did not think of herself, of the fact that she, too, was bound. It seemed to her a matter of no consequence. If she had not married Lance le Breton she would have married no

one else. That she herself should be bound while life lasted, was of no moment.

She went down to dinner, still half in a dream. The meal was as silent and constrained a one as usual, and she had no appetite and could eat but little: Lance's face floated before her, Lance's voice was in her ears. And it was the face which he turned to her when he said good-bye, the voice was the one in which he said: "I am a gentleman, as you say. You have trusted me. I will not forget."

Remembrance of the expression on his face, the manly dignity of his voice, haunted her and filled her with a vague self-reproach.

She was glad when the dinner was over and she could go into the drawing-room. She went to the piano and played softly a nocturne of Chopin; but through the exquisite, subtle sadness of the music, Lance le Breton's voice penetrated. A feeling of sadness stole over her; a feeling of loneliness. She wanted him: yes, *she wanted him*. She had been brave enough while he was by her side; she had gone through the ceremony with courage and determination because he was by her side; but now she felt lonely, helpless, friendless. What was the matter with her? Mr. Lance le Breton was nothing to her but a means of thwarting the Froytes. Surely nothing more. And yet, *she wanted him*.

Mr. Froyte came into the room with a piece of fancy work which never seemed to be finished.

"Won't you go on playing, Kyra, dear?" she said, in her timid voice.

Kyra turned to the piano again; but she stopped as she saw, in the mirror on the wall, Stracey enter the room. She saw him make a motion to his mother. Mrs. Froyte, with a nervous, timid glance from Kyra to him, gathered her needle-work together and left the room. Stracey approached the piano with his slow, almost stealthy gait.

"We are alone, Kyra," he said. "I want to speak to you. I want to ask you—to ask you to tell me your decision, your reply to my proposal."

She rose from the music-stool and stood looking at him, as if startled by his question.

Even while he had been speaking she had been thinking of, recalling, Lance le Breton's words and the voice, the deep, musical voice in which they had been uttered; and Stracey's tone had jarred upon it; there was a note of meanness, of insincerity in it compared with the manly tones of Lance's voice.

Something in her rebelled, revolted. At all costs, she would refuse, reject him.

"Yes; I have been thinking," she said. "I am sorry, Stracey, but I cannot do what you wish. I cannot marry you."

She spoke the words calmly enough. For was she not buoyed up with the thought that she was married already? She could set him at defiance.

Stracey started slightly, but still kept upon his face the smile with which he had begun.

"I am sorry to hear this, Kyra," he said; "because I love you very dearly. You must know that I love you; that my greatest desire in life is to win you for my wife. I had hoped that reflection would have brought you to understand, to realise my love and devotion. Are you quite sure that you mean 'no'?"

"I am quite sure," she said.

He took a step forward and tried to take her hand, the hand over which hung the diamond bracelet; but she drew it beyond his reach.

"I am quite sure," she said. "I do not want to marry you, Stracey."

"You do not love me," he said. "Do you mean that? If so, I do not lose heart altogether. I am content to wait. I only want your promise that you will think of me as your future husband."

Before her rose the vision of the storm-darkened church, of the mumbling clergyman, of Lance le Breton's manly, agitated voice.

"It is quite impossible," she said, in a low voice. "I could not marry you. I could not."

As she said the words the door was opened, softly, gently, and Mr. James Froyte stood listening.

"Think again, consider," said Stracey, in his soft, low voice.

"I have thought," said Kyra. "I cannot marry you."

She slipped the bracelet off her hand and held it out.

"Take this, Stracey; I do not want it."

He made a gesture of repudiation, and, with a sigh, she let the bracelet fall upon her arm and slowly, with an Oriental gesture, glided from the room by the door opposite that at which James Froyte was listening.

He entered as she disappeared. Father and son regarded each other; the father with a nervous, apprehensive questioning, the son with a sullen, angry determination.

"She has refused you?" murmured James Froyte.

"She has," assented Stracey. "So much the worse for her."

CHAPTER XIII.

JAMES FROYTE started at the muttered threat and rubbed his hands nervously as he glanced furtively at Stracey's dark face.

"Wouldn't it be better to give up this idea of a marriage with Kyra?" he said. "You have tried, and failed; you can't compel her to marry you—we're not living in the Middle Ages—and you can't use force. Besides, it's not to be thought of. I'm sorry you got the idea; by making her a proposal and bringing about a rejection, you have caused an—embarrassment. I don't see how you can live in the same house together now. It's made things uncomfortable. Better give up the idea."

He made the suggestion nervously and timidly, and Stracey ignored it. He stood gnawing his mustache and gripping his hands behind his back.

"And there's another thing," said his father, in a low voice; "she may come to know about the will; she may want to know what money she has. Have you thought of that? You can't expect to keep her in ignorance forever."

"I've thought of that," said Stracey.

"I wonder she hasn't asked before," said James Froyte, moodily. "If she'd been anything like any other girl, she would have done so; it's only because of the way she has been brought up, and her ignorance of money and affairs generally, that she hasn't done so. If she should ask, what do you intend to do, what do you intend to tell her? You can't keep the truth from her. And directly she knows, she will be independent of us, she will go to a solicitor—"

"And you would lose the allowance you are being paid for her maintenance. You would have to leave this place and go back to a squalid street in the suburbs," said Stracey, meaningly.

James Froyte winced—he was one of those weak-natured men whose gods are ease and comfort. The remembrance of his old life of genteel poverty, of a semi-detached villa in Hackney Wick or some less salubrious spot, made him shudder.

"I know," he said. "But I don't see what we are to do."

"I daresay not," assented Stracey, with a sneer; "and that being the case, you had better leave the affair to me."

James Froyte emitted something between a sigh and a groan, and shuffled off to the smoking-room. On his way, he met Mrs. Froyte in the hall.

"Where is Kyra?" she asked in her toneless voice.

"She has gone to bed; she is tired," said her husband. "You'd better go to bed, too. You look as pale as a ghost."

"I am going," she said, as she went slowly up the stairs.

James Froyte went on to the smoking-room and sank on to the easy-chair he loved so fondly, and, lighting a pipe, smoked moodily. He had always been afraid of his son, with his half-sullen reticence, his dark, furtive eyes and secretive manner; he was more than ever afraid of him now, more than ever dominated by him since Stracey had come back home from that mysterious life of which his father knew nothing, of which Stracey never spoke. He was afraid that some plot in regard to Kyra and her fortune was forming in Stracey's mind; but, though he was afraid of it, he had not the courage to speak of his fears openly to Stracey, and was quite inclined to benefit by any schemes which Stracey might form. Go back to penury and Hackney Wick: he looked round the comfortable room and shuddered.

Presently Stracey entered, and his father glanced at him and shuffled in his chair uneasily.

Stracey went to a bureau, and unlocking it, began to turn over some papers; then, without looking up, he said:

"I am looking for a letter of Rolf's, the lawyer's."

"What letter?" asked his father.

"Any letter," replied Stracey. "Do you happen to have one?"

"Yes; I have some upstairs; amongst my papers."

"Will you please go and get it?" said Stracey in a casual way.

James Froyte left the room and came down presently with two or three letters in his hand.

"Here are some," he said. "What do you want them for?"

"Only to verify a date," said Stracey.

He glanced at the letters and threw them into a pigeon-hole of the bureau; then he lit a cigarette and smoked in silence, but presently nodded towards the table on which the spirit-decanter and glasses stood.

"Are you going to have anything before you go to bed?" he asked, significantly.

James Froyte rose and mixed himself some whiskey-and-water, and drank it in silence; then, taking the broad hint, he said:

"I think I'll go up now. Good-night, Stracey." He paused at the door and looked towards the desk nervously. "Shall I take those letters again?" he asked.

"Oh, yes—or, perhaps, you'd better leave them," replied Stracey, indifferently.

But when the door had closed, his manner changed. He went to the door and listened intently; then, when he had heard his father's footsteps ascending the stairs, he turned the key in the lock and went back to the desk with a resolute look on his face, and taking the dead lawyer's letters from the pigeon-hole, he spread them out before him. As he did so, he saw a blank sheet of paper amongst them; that is, it was blank on three sides, but had some figures in pencil on the fourth page.

It was a sheet of Mr. Rolf's office-paper, with his printed address. It was just one of those happy flukes which often favour your knave; and Stracey's eyes shone and his thin lips curved with a sinister smile as he gazed at the sheet. The lawyer had evidently set down the figures by way of memorandum or to assist a calculation, and had sent them, by mistake or intention, to James Froyte. Stracey found the letter which referred to the figures; they were a rough calculation of Kyra's fortune.

He copied the figures into his copy-book, then, with a piece of india-rubber, he carefully erased them from the note-paper, which now lay under his hands, quite blank.

He put it aside and took another sheet of note-paper, and setting up one of the lawyers letters in front of him, as one sets up a drawing-copy, he wrote carefully and slowly on the blank sheet; in fact, he covered several sheets of paper; then, apparently satisfied, he took them to the empty fire-place, and setting a light to them with a match, watched them until they were reduced to ashes. Presently he went back to the bureau and wrote, as slowly and carefully, on Mr. Rolf's letter-paper, surveying what he had written with a critical eye, and comparing it with each one of the lawyer's letters; and at last he placed it carefully with the others and put them back in the pigeon-hole; then he went to the table, mixed himself a strong glass of whiskey-and-water, and drank it quickly.

But his work did not appear to be finished for the night;

for, after awhile, he began to glance toward the desk, and at last he went to it and took from one of the recesses a large, blue paper. It was a form by which certain stocks was transferred from Kyra Jermyn to Stracey Froyte.

If Kyra had accepted him, he would have asked her to sign it, as he had asked her and she had signed, other papers; but he was afraid that if he asked her now she might refuse, or might ask inconvenient questions; might, perhaps, insist upon reading the paper; for the courage she had displayed in refusing him had been like a revelation to him, and had shown him the need for caution in his future dealings with her.

He opened the paper and looked at it thoughtfully for a minute or two; then, with a sudden flush and a setting of his teeth, he muttered:

"I must risk it. I want the money; must have it, in fact, if I am to get that cheque from Nolly. Yes, I must risk it. Curse her! why can't she be sensible and fall in with my views? It's not my fault; I'm driven to it."

He snatched up the pen, with a sullen oath, and wrote "Kyra Jermyn" in the proper place.

He had written the words quickly; but the signature was so close an imitation of Kyra's that he regarded it with a smile of satisfaction and admiration. Then he folded the transfer, put it in an envelope and addressed it to a firm of stock-brokers, and, as he noiselessly locked the bureau and put the keys into his pocket, he drew a breath of relief and smiled again with satisfaction; for he told himself that he had done a good and profitable night's work.

Kyra had gone straight to her room. She was surprised at her own calmness and self-possession. It was true that her heart was beating rather fast, but it was not with fear. Whence had come the strength with which she had been enabled to definitely refuse Stracey; to tell him, without any temporising, that she would not be his wife?

Suddenly she knew whence the strength had come: it had arisen from the fact that she was married to Lance le Breton. However keen her dread of Stracey Froyte might be, the fact of her marriage placed her beyond his reach; it was an insurmountable barrier behind which she could shelter herself.

It was her wedding-night. She tried to realise it as she slowly undressed, and recalled the momentous incidents of the day. Where was Lance le Breton—her husband—at that moment? Was he thinking of her, was he regretting the marriage? She hoped not. He had fulfilled his part of the contract, it now remained to her to fulfil hers. She would

ask the Froytes to-morrow whether her father had left her rich or poor, and she would write and tell Lance le Breton. She would not shrink from asking the Froytes; indeed, why should she? She was within her right. Besides, now that Stracey had insisted upon her answer, and she could not marry him, she felt that she could not live in the same house with him; for he might not accept her refusal, might ask her again and again. She decided vaguely that she must go; vaguely, because she did not know where to go, or what to do. And there was no one whom she could ask: Lance le Breton—her husband—had gone; and, excepting his girl-cousin, Lady May, she had no other friend in the world; and certainly she could not ask May, who would be as ignorant as herself of the proper course to pursue.

She went to bed, but it was a long time before she could sleep; it was only natural that she should think of Lance; it was only natural that she should think of him as she remembered him at the last moment of their parting, and that his face, with all its wistfulness and grave determination, should haunt her.

She rose early, and from dreams of him, and went down to the stile in the lane, scarcely knowing why she went there; but as if her feet had been drawn thither by some mysterious influence.

As she was coming back Stracey met her in the garden. She held her breath for a moment, and then regarded him with surprise, for he did not look morose and sullen as she had expected, but met her with a pleasant smile and nod, as if nothing had happened to break their friendly relations.

"Ah, Kyra! been out to get the morning air?" he said. "How well you are looking this morning! Breakfast is just ready; you ought to be hungry after your walk. Come along!"

He continued talking, brightly and cheerfully, and scarcely giving her a chance to get in a word, until they reached the house. He talked all breakfast-time, in just the same way; and Kyra saw his father glance at him once or twice with an air of surprise and doubt. Before the meal was over, Stracey pushed his chair away and rose.

"I'm going into the town for some cigarettes," he said. "Is there anything I can do for any of you—for you, Kyra? No ribbons to match, no magazines to buy? Don't wait lunch for me; I may not be back."

Then his father understood: Stracey was going to absent himself for the day, to efface himself, and so bridge over the

embarrassment of last night's refusal. In a vague way, Kyra also understood; but it did not lessen her determination.

She thought about it the whole day, which she spent, as usual, mostly by herself, and thinking, thinking until her head ached. When she came down dressed for dinner, Stracey had not returned; and he only came in at the last moment. He talked at dinner as he talked at breakfast-time, brightly and cheerfully, as if nothing had happened to cause any restraint between him and Kyra, as if nothing were on his mind; and she sat, almost in silence, now and again regarding him with her grave, lovely eyes, which he always as skilfully avoided. She went into the drawing-room after dinner and played as usual; but the night was hot, and, taking up a lace shawl, she threw it over her head and shoulders, and went on the terrace and walked up and down.

Presently she heard the voices of the two men in the smoking-room, and with a bracing up of her resolution she stopped at the French window, and, after a moment's hesitation, entered the room. James Froyte half started from his easy-chair and Stracey turned quickly, but smiled and nodded to her.

"What a lovely night, Kyra! But take care you don't catch cold; that lace shawl is very thin and inadequate," he said in his soft voice.

Kyra looked from one to the other.

"I want to speak to you," she said. Her face was pale, but her lips and eyes were steady. She looked very beautiful, the moonlight falling upon her slim, graceful figure, as she stood erect in the rays pouring through the window. "I want to return this to you, Stracey."

She took the diamond bracelet from her pocket and held it out to him; and he took it and turned it over in his hand, regarding her with a smile, but watchfully, under his half-lowered lids.

"Ah, yes, I understand," he said. "You think you ought to give this back to me because—of last night—because you refused to marry me. But why should you, my dear Kyra? Why should it make any difference between us? You do not imagine that I bear you any grudge, that I am so vain and self-sufficient as to bear any malice? Good heavens, no! My affection for you is too deep, too true for that. You would have made me very happy, would have made my father here, my mother, all of us, very happy if you could have said 'Yes;' but we do not feel, and we have no right to feel, ag-

grieved by your refusal. If you cannot be my wife, you must try and be—a sister to me. Why should you not?"

Notwithstanding the blandness, the softness, with which the words were spoken, something in the tone of the speaker, something sinister in the smile, made it difficult for her to repress a shudder.

"Pray take the thing back and wear it, my dear Kyra," he said; "yes, wear it, for then I shall know that you have forgiven me for my presumption, that we are still friends."

The proposal was so plausible that Kyra, at the moment, could find nothing with which to rebut it; and she took the bracelet reluctantly; but put it in her pocket instead of upon her wrist. Then she said, in a low voice, but steadily:

"There was something else. Mr. Froyte—Stracey—I wanted to ask you about—my father."

James Froyte's hands closed on the arm of his chair, and he looked nervously from the pale, resolute face of the girl to Stracey's, upon which the moonlight was falling. He had ceased to smile, for his face was perfectly calm—calm with a soft gravity, as befitted the subject.

"Certainly, Kyra, dear," he said, smoothly. "What is it you wish to know?"

Kyra's lips trembled now.

"I wanted to ask you—perhaps I ought to have asked you before—whether I have any money, whether my father died rich or poor?"

James Froyte's hands clutched the arms of his chair spasmodically; but Stracey continued to regard Kyra gravely, and with, now, something like pity.

"My dear Kyra," he said, in his softest voice, "I can quite understand your desire to know your position. My father and I intended to tell you how you stand; but we were waiting until you were stronger, until you had recovered from the shock of your bereavement. That is so, father, is it not?"

James Froyte looked at him apprehensively, then nodded, and said, huskily:

"Yes, yes: quite so."

"I have no doubt," continued Stracey, "that you are under the impression that your father died a wealthy, if not a very wealthy, man. Your mode of life, while he was living, would doubtless give you that impression. Alas! my dear Kyra, I am sorry to say, that it was an erroneous one. Your poor father was in receipt of a large income while he lived; and he would, no doubt, have left you well provided for; but, unfortunately, some little time before he died he en-

gaged in speculation which resulted disastrously. I am very much afraid that his misfortunes—the unfortunate end of these speculations—hastened his end. I do not think that he himself was quite aware of the condition of his affairs; certainly my father—I was abroad at the time of Mr. Jermyn's death, as you are aware—did not know how your father stood. It was not until after his death that we learnt from his lawyer that Mr. Jermyn's fortune had been entirely absorbed by these miserable speculations.”

There was silence. Kyra continued to gaze at him as if she were trying, as indeed she was, to realise the truth. Stracey stood with one arm leaning on the mantle-shelf, his face grave, his eyes downcast. His father, with his mouth half open, was staring at him, expectantly.

“I have the lawyer's letter here,” said Stracey; “and I will read it to you.”

He went to the bureau and unlocked it, and taking out the sheaf of letters, selected one and gravely read it aloud:

“MY DEAR MR. FROYTE,—I have gone thoroughly into the affairs of my late client, Mr. Jermyn, and I am sorry to be compelled to confirm what I told you when I saw you last. The large fortune which Mr. Jermyn once possessed—the accumulations and the investments of many years—has been entirely swallowed up by the losses incurred in speculations on the Stock Exchange, of which I was entirely ignorant. Had Mr. Jermyn asked my advice, I should have warned him against these rash ventures, and, probably, under Providence, should have been able to dissuade him from a course which has resulted in the loss of his whole fortune and reduced to poverty the daughter to whom he was so devoted, and who would otherwise have been amply provided for. I am very much grieved at her position; but I am somewhat consoled by the reflection that she has in you and your son, Mr. Stracey, warm and constant friends, who will protect and watch over her.

“I am, yours very faithfully,

“ROBERT ROLF.”

Stracey read this very slowly, so slowly that Kyra, notwithstanding her confusion, was enabled to take in its sense. She drew a long breath, and her eyes closed for an instant. And at that instant she was thinking, not of herself, but of Lancelle Breton. At last she said, in so low a voice that it was almost inaudible:

"Then—then I am poor—I have nothing—I am penniless?"

Stracey heaved a sigh; his father fell back and drew a long, gasping breath, his eyes fixed on the letter; and a shudder ran through him.

"Yes," said Stracey, "that is the truth. I am sure, my dear Kyra, that you would rather know it, know the worst; and I am quite sure that you will not allow it to disturb you, to make you unhappy. As Mr. Rolf said, you have a true friend in my father—and may I say?—myself."

Kyra passed her hand over her brow.

"I am poor—not a penny! I have been living on your charity! I must go—go somewhere. The letter—give me the letter: I want to read it, quietly, to understand—"

Stracey held out the letter and she took it.

"Certainly, my dear Kyra. But you will not forget that this makes no difference to us or to you; I mean that you will still live here with your friends, with those who love you—"

She took the letter, looked at him as if she did not hear him, and went out on to the terrace.

James Froyte struggled from his chair with his arm outstretched as if imploringly.

"No, no, no, Stracey!" he gasped. "For God's sake—"

Stracey caught him by the shoulder.

"Hush! Hold your tongue," he said, in a whisper, almost hissed; and he forced him softly back into his chair again.

James Froyte lay back panting and regarding his son's face, white under its sallowness, as if it were a basilisk. Presently they heard a faint cry from the terrace, and they both rushed out. Kyra was lying back in the chair, her eyes closed, her face white, her arms hanging limply. They stood and gazed at her in a horrible silence for a moment.

"It's—it's one of her trances," whispered James Froyte, huskily. "She looks—my God! she looks as if—"

"As if she were dead," finished Stracey, in a voice that was lower than a whisper.

He stooped and picked up the letter which had fluttered from her lifeless fingers and put it carefully in his pocket, his eyes still fixed on the white face. Then he started and glanced at his father, as if he feared that the thought which had flashed through his mind should have been read by the other man.

"Yes," he said, almost to himself, "she looks as if she were dead!"

CHAPTER XIV.

It is rather late in the day to remark that London is the most wonderful city in the world. The man who knows it and loves it can never possibly grow weary of it because, however well he may know and love it, he is always certain of finding something novel and interesting in it. It is a city of surprise-packets.

For instance, the person who only took a cursory view of that northern district of it which goes by the name of Pentonville, would consider himself fully justified in regarding it as an extremely dull and uninteresting place, a region of dreary streets with equally dreary houses, each bearing a distressing likeness to its neighbour, and all without that one touch of individuality which gives life its savour; but the real student of London would not be deceived or satisfied by this superficial view, and, if he penetrated into the heart and the secret places of Pentonville, he would not be disappointed at his surprise-packet.

White Horse Lane would have afforded the student of London one of the instances referred to. As a matter of fact, it was not a lane, whatever it may have been at one time, but a *cul-de-sac*, which you entered and left by a low gate-way or archway of old, time-eaten stone. This archway stood in the middle of a dreary and commonplace street, and few persons would have been tempted to pass underneath it. But when you did so, the surprise was there, awaiting you full blown; for, by a sharp turn you came upon a square place which looked like a bit of medieval garden dropped, as if by magic, into the heart of squalid London. In the centre of the square was a grand old elm, now in full leaf and casting a grateful shade upon the huge cobble-stones with which the yard was paved. At one time there had been a famous inn in White Horse Lane, but though the iron frame-work of its sign still protruded from it, it had long ceased to be an inn, and now the greater part of it was filled with the material used by the carpenter and packing-case maker whose workshop and tiny dwelling-house fronted it. The whole place, excepting the stables where Mr. Nolly kept his stock-in-trade, was running to picturesque ruin and decay; yet not the whole place, for one must except the small portion of it in which Nolly and his daughter Bessie lived. It was this part of White Horse Lane which made it so picturesque to the beholder. It con-

sisted of three or four rooms on the ground floor of the old inn, which had been divided into small but cosy rooms, and outside and in, they were as fresh as paint and paper and whitewash could make them. There was what is called a "window garden," all gay, not to say brilliant, with scarlet geranium and golden calceolaria on the sill of the window—a lattice window—of the little living-room. The door, open in the summer, and, indeed, nearly all the year round, was painted a vivid green, and on the wall beside it hung a cage containing a thrush that filled the summer evening air of White Horse Lane with a heavenly harmony, as he looked down at the huge Persian cat sitting on the threshold and blinking at the sparrows who, with the Cockney impudence for which they are famous, were hopping about and picking up the corn which Mr. Nolly's stable-boy had dropped. The interior of the living-room was as bright and cheerful as the exterior; it, too, was as fresh as paint could make it; its paper was of a brilliant design representing roses of an impossible size and an impossible crimson growing in impossible luxuriance over a vividly green lattice. Everything that could be made to shine in the little room shone to a dazzling extent; and everything that ought to have been clean was as clean as a new pin. Through the door-way of a small adjoining room came the rays and the warmth from the fire at which Bessie was making tea.

A combination of cheerful sounds accompanied the operation. The thrush sang at the door-way, the sparrows chirped as they hopped about the cobble-stones, the cat purred loudly, and the kettle sang; and, like a bass accompaniment, there was the "tap, tap! boom, boom!" of the carpenter's hammer as he fastened on the strips of iron on the packing-cases; there was also the snoring of the blind basket-maker's dog, who lay asleep on the strip of hot pavement outside his master's tiny workshop and dwelling-place, which stood a little farther up the yard.

Above the carpenter's shop, which was exactly opposite Nolly's, a board bore the name, "John Warden," with "Carpenter and Packing-case Maker. Estimates given," underneath; and John Warden himself, who was as broad and healthy-looking a young fellow as if he lived and worked in a country village instead of in a London court-yard, could, by raising his eyes, look across the yard and through the door-way and right into a part of the room in which Bessie's pretty and graceful figure flitted to and fro as she laid the tea-things.

And John did very often raise his eyes and look wistfully and somewhat sadly at the pretty picture: it was one he had been looking at and admiring for many wears—almost as long as he could remember. It was a picture which had at one and the same time sweetened and saddened his life. He had been in love with the pretty Bessie ever since the time when she had not been pretty, but had been an angular school-girl, all legs and wings and sharp corners; but she had seemed pretty in John's eyes, even then: guess, then, how desirable she must seem now, now that the angles were rounded off into delicious curves, the arms and legs had become graceful and proportional, the thin, little face gentle and pretty, and the lank hair, no longer flicking about her shoulders, but bound into a golden knot at the back of her head, and fluttering about her temples in tendrils like floss-silk.

There had been a time, not so very long distant, when John had entertained a hope that his affection might be returned, his passionate, dog-like devotion might not go unrewarded; but a sudden change had taken place in their old girl-and-boy relations—it had dated from the time when a certain dark, sallow-faced, “gentlemanly-looking,” young fellow had dropped in to tea and supper at the Nollys—and Bessie's manner towards her old playmate of the yard had grown cold and reserved, as if her mind had suddenly become much occupied with new and strange matters—perhaps with some new and strange man—the dark, sallow-faced, gentlemanly man, whose name, John knew, was “Black.”

The change had made him very unhappy, and he had been inclined to give way to despair; but Mr. Black's visits had come to an end as suddenly as they had begun, and John, though not very hopeful, was beginning to pluck up a little heart and to look across at the Nollys' bright, little dwelling a little less sadly.

This evening, he could not only catch occasional glimpses of the slim, graceful figure, in its pretty print dress—one of those dainty, bewitching prints which are now coming into fashion again, and which—thank goodness—you can buy for sixpence halfpenny a yard in any of the drapers in High Street, Islington—but he could also hear Bessie's voice as she went singing softly, and a little sadly, about her work; and it seemed to him the sweetest sound in the world, sweeter even than the thrush's song, the “tap, tap! boom, boom!” of his hammer, just as the old-fashioned yard, which the outer world knew as White Horse Lane, seemed the brightest and best spot in the universe; though Mr. Nolly's stables were not

upic-and-span with red-brick and incaustic tiles, wrought-iron and brass-fittings, like some of the "swell" premises of the West End horse-dealers, who are, some of them, better gentlemen than their customers, and who have made the trade a science and a profession depending for success not only upon a knowledge of horse-flesh, but upon the possession of social gifts and infinite tact. Mr. Nolly did not aspire to any such position as this; most of his dealings were confined to small tradesmen who needed a horse for business purposes during the week, as well as to take out "the missis and the kids" on Sunday.

The yard was often very untidy with the shavings of John's own work-shop, to say nothing of the litter made by the basket-maker; but to John, and to Bessie also, be it said, it had all the beauty of home; and both of them were glad whenever they turned into it under the old, time-eaten archway.

Now, it may seem strange to the ingenuous reader that a man like Nolly, with such doubtful antecedents, should have been "discovered" in such an idyllic spot, surrounded, so to speak, by an atmosphere of poetry; but the ingenuous, though critical, reader may be reminded that there is nothing so inconsistent as man. No good man is wholly good, no bad man is wholly bad; there are dark spots in the best of men, there are streaks of white in the blackest villain; and one of Nolly's streaks was represented by his love for his only child, the pretty Bessie. In the world outside White Horse Lane he was an individual burdened with few scruples in the way of money-making; but immediately he passed under the shadow of the archway and came in sight of the green-painted door of his curious abode, he was quite a different person; in fact, a loving and unselfish father and an honest man. As he said, once he was at home he left all business, except his legitimate one, horse-dealing, outside. Nolly had two sides to his character, but Bessie was ignorant of one and was only acquainted with the other—that of the tender-hearted and indulgent father who was proud of "his gal's" prettiness, and who loved to see her dressed in bright prints and soft merino, and whose one object in life was to see her happy and to scrape some money together for her.

Not a little respect was combined with his affection; for Nolly had "married above him:" the daughter of a grocer in the High Street; and Bessie "took after" her mother; had inherited her mother's fairness and look of fragility, her mother's blue eyes and soft voice. Sometimes there shot

across Nolly's rugged heart the dread that she had inherited the consumption of which her mother had died; but Bessie, to his infinite relief, had grown stronger as she had grown out of childhood, though occasionally she "paled off:" she had done so, by the way, when Mr. Black's visits had ceased.

John watched the progress of the tea-laying in the Nolly's little living-room, and it reminded him to take off his glue-pot and set his own grimy kettle in its place over the fire. Having done so, he straightened his back, lit a pipe, and strolled across a yard, gazing intently up at the sparrows in the elm as if he were so absorbed in their quarrelling and love-making as to be unaware of or to have forgotten the open door-way and the neatly dressed figure beyond it; but within a few paces of it he stopped as if quite casually, and, taking his pipe from his mouth, whistled to the thrush, who, with the amiability due to a neighbour and old friend, opened its beak a little wider, swelled out its throat until every feather was separate, and sent forth a fuller and sweeter burst of melody than before. Bessie heard the whistle and paused, with a tea-cloth in her hand, to nod at the stalwart young man with the short, crisp, chestnut hair and pleasant face.

"Fine evening, Bessie," said John. "Father not in yet?"

"Yes, it is, John," she replied. "No, not yet; but I am expecting him every minute."

"Birds seem quite gay, don't they?" he remarked, staring at the elm as if he had never seen it before.

"Yes, they do," assented Bessie. "Sounds quite like the country, doesn't it, John?" She heaved a little sigh. "Sometimes I wish we lived there; and if it wasn't for the tree and the birds I should wish it oftener than I do."

"Oh, the country's all very well," said John, making the admission with a true Londoner's reluctance and reserve. "Pretty dull living there always," he said. "Now, it's never dull here; or if ever you do feel a bit mopish you can get into the High Street in a minute or two; and there's plenty going on there, goodness knows. A man would find it difficult to be mopish there."

He spoke of the High Street, Islington, with the modest pride with which a West End man might speak of Regent Street or Bond Street. He looked at the tree again and then at the blind basket-maker's dog, and then his eyes came slowly back to the pavement, which he kicked with his toe as he said, in a painfully casual way:

"Heard anything of this piece they've got at the Grand, Bessie?"

She shook her head and stifled a little sigh.

"No; I've not been to the theatre lately," she said; and she sighed again as she remembered that she had not been since she had gone with her father and—and Mr. Black one evening, months and months ago.

"They say it's rather good," remarked John, with the same laboured casualness. "One of the stage carpenters give me a couple of orders—they're for the fust circle—I was thinking p'raps you'd like to go."

Bessie looked across the yard doubtfully. A visit to the Grand was always pleasant; but it would not be unmixed pleasure for her; for she knew that she would be thinking of her last visit. But she also knew that John would be disappointed if she refused, so she said:

"Oh, thank you very much. Oh, yes, I should like it."

John's simulated indifference vanished like smoke, and he brightened up and knocked the ashes out of his pipe with sudden energy.

"That's all right," he said. "I'll come across for you. Half-past seven sharp; we'll go in by the early doors."

"Oh, but that's sixpence extra, John," said the careful Bessie.

"Never mind that," he returned, as if such prodigal expense were not worth calculating. "I don't know as I care for you to mix with the crowd."

"I'm sure I should come to no harm," said Bessie; "but it's just as you like. Yes; I shall enjoy it; I haven't been to the play for a long time, though father has often offered to take me."

"Well, we'll go to-night," said John, cheerfully. "I'll get across and finish my work and tidy up. Yes; them birds do make a noise, don't they?"

He tore himself away with a lover's usual shyness and reluctance, and Bessie hastened to the kitchen to make the tea, thinking what a good fellow John was and how kind he'd always been to her. There was no one she liked better—excepting a dark, sallow-faced young man with the air and manner of a "gentleman." But what was the use of thinking of him? He had gone away suddenly, would probably never come back.

Presently she heard a horse's footsteps, and Nolly came riding into the court-yard, and, giving his horse to the stable-boy, who was always hovering between painful sobriety and happy intoxication, came into the living-room.

"Tea ready, my gal? I'll just clean up and be down in a

minute. I'm a bit late, but I had a deal on and the chap willy-nillied till I was most inclined to tell him to keep his blessed horse and eat it: howsomever, I got it cheap at last, dirt cheap. I always do when they willy-nilly."

While he was upstairs "cleaning up," Bessie made the tea; and she was buttering the hot toast which her father loved, when a shadow fell across the sunlit door-way. The cat scurried towards the stable, the blind basket-maker's dog rose from his slumber and barked, and the thrush ceased singing. Bessie looked up to see the cause of this change in the nature of things, and, with an exclamation and a start, dropped the knife, the piece of half-melted butter on its end, and making a greasy smudge on the hitherto spotless cloth.

"Mr. Black!" she breathed, the colour fading from her face, then flying back to it and making a vivid patch of crimson.

"How do you do, Miss Bessie?" said the soft voice which had been ringing in her ears ever since she had heard it last. "Is your father at home? May I come in?"

She tried to smile, the smile which is as conventional in the unfashionable East End as it is in the fashionable West; but her voice faltered and fluttered as she replied:

"Father's—father's in. Yes; he's upstairs; he'll be down in a minute. Won't you—won't you come in?"

And Mr. Black, taking off his hat with the old grace which had made its mark upon poor little Bessie's susceptible heart, went in.

CHAPTER XV.

BESSIE was all in a flutter at the appearance of Mr. Black, her father's old friend; but, of course, she tried to conceal her pleasant agitation and to take his visit as quite an ordinary event. At her first glance she had noticed the change in him; he was better dressed, better groomed, and seemed much more prosperous than of old; and he was, Bessie thought, still more handsome. It was his "gentlemanly" appearance as much as his good looks, his superiority in tone and manner to the few men whom she knew, the residents of Pentonville, which had caught the girl's fancy; and to her he appeared to be the model of refinement, even aristocratic. Compared with John Warden, for instance, he seemed quite a prince.

"Won't you take a chair?" she said, fighting with her shyness and trying to drive the blush from her face, and she par-

tially succeeded, though she could not quench the sudden brightness which shone in her eyes; "that's a more comfortable one; at least you used to say so. You've been away, haven't you, Mr. Black?"

"Yes," he said as he sank into the chair, sank gracefully, and displaying nothing of that difficulty with his arms and legs which the John Wardens always evinced when they seated themselves. "Yes, I've been abroad, Miss Bessie; and that accounts for my absence. I have not long returned, and I have taken the first opportunity of paying you a visit."

"I—father—thought you were never coming again; that perhaps we had offended you in some way."

"Oh, no; indeed no," he responded, an impressive emphasis in his soft tone. "I am sure you could not have thought that. I have never forgotten your kindness and the delightful times I have spent here. I assure you I have often thought of them and longed for them out there in—abroad."

"And father often thought of you," said Bessie, as she moved about, setting an extra cup and saucer and plate, and cutting some extra-thin bread-and-butter. "He'll be very glad to see you. We haven't too many friends, Mr. Black."

"I am sure you could have all you wanted," he said, promptly.

He leant back and looked round the cosy room. It was very small and humble, compared even with the Elms, and he regarded it with covert contempt; but his eyes dwelt furtively on Bessie with anything but contempt. He decided that she had improved since he had last seen her; she was a little thinner, perhaps, but that only made her seem all the more lithe and graceful; and she was certainly prettier; indeed, she was very pretty, with her soft, golden hair and blue eyes and delicate features. It occurred to him that if she could be transplanted, say, to the tasteful drawing-room of a snug, little villa, that she would harmonise with her surroundings. Yes: she was too good for this poky room, neat and picturesque as it was, in a court off a back street in Pentonville.

Then her evident pleasure at his advent, of course, flattered his self-esteem and aroused his vanity. He was really not sorry that he had come. Perhaps Bessie's pleasure at sight of him was more grateful to him by contrast with Kyra's coldness and actual repugnance.

"You are looking very well, Miss Bessie," he said; "not at all changed—excepting for the better."

Bessie blushed and laughed softly: the praise was very sweet in her ears.

"That's a very nice compliment, Mr. Black," she said. "Father, you didn't hear that," as Mr. Nolly came down the steep stairs. "Here's Mr. Black come to see us."

Nolly gave Stracey a warm welcome, and his one eye glittered with satisfaction.

"You've just come in time for tea," he said. "You see, it ain't such a surprise to me, Bessie; I knew Mr. Black was in England; I met him out Holmby way, and I asked him to drop in."

Bessie looked from one to the other, a trifle disappointed; but Mr. Black hastened to say, "But I should have come, even if I had not met you and received your kind invitation," and Bessie's face cleared again.

"Tea is quite ready," she said. "You like two lumps in yours, I remember, Mr. Black."

While he talked to her father, Stracey watched the girl in his covert way. He noticed how prettily she poured out the tea, how well she held her head, and how small and nicely shaped her hands were. Every now and then he addressed a remark to her; but Bessie was quite content to sit and sip her tea and pretend to eat her toast, and listen to the soft voice which she remembered so distinctly. In the midst of the conversation a firm step was heard outside and a shadow fell across the threshold. It was John Warden, in his Sunday best, with his honest face shining from his careful clean-up. The smile with which he had approached the door faded slowly and his face fell as he looked in at the party. Bessie started at if she had quite forgotten him—which she had—and her face, so softly radiant a moment before, grew overcast with dismay.

"Oh, John, I'm so sorry," she said; "but I can't go; we've got a visitor, you see."

"Yes, I see," said John, gloomily, carefully avoiding looking at the dark-faced Mr. Black.

"Won't you come in and have some tea?" asked Bessie; but though she tried to throw some warmth into the invitation, she did not altogether succeed, and John shook his head.

"No, thank you," he said. "I want to see this piece. I shall be late; I must go."

"If you'd really like me—" began Bessie.

"Oh, not by no means," interrupted John. "I couldn't think of taking you away from your friend. Good-evening."

He touched his hat, still carefully looking away from the visitor, and marched off.

"Who was that?" asked Stracey, though he knew perfectly well.

"It's only John Warden—over the way," said Nolly, jerking his bald head in the direction of the carpenter's shop.

"Ah, yes," said Stracey, with polite indifference. "I'm afraid I've interfered with a little outing of Miss Bessie's. I hope you won't stay at home on my account," he added, turning to Bessie with well-feigned anxiety.

"Oh, no," she responded, hurriedly. "It was of no consequence. John only asked me by chance; he'd just as soon go alone. Besides, I can go with him some other evening. In fact, I didn't really want to go to-night."

"If you are quite sure," murmured Stracey.

She assured him that she was quite sure, and went on talking quickly and gaily, as if to efface the little embarrassment.

Mr. Black told them some stories of his foreign travels—stories which did credit to his imaginative powers—and Nolly got out his pipe and tobacco-pouch. Mr. Black discovered that his cigarette-case was empty, and declined the offer of Nolly's tobacco.

"Far too strong for me," he said, with a laugh. "I'll just run into the High Street and get some cigarettes. By the way, perhaps Miss Bessie will give me the pleasure of her company? It's almost too fine an evening for indoors. At any rate, a little run wouldn't do you any harm, Miss Bessie. Of course, it won't make up to you for the play; but still—"

Bessie stood blushing and hesitating; but her father cut in, roughly but kindly, for he knew she wanted to go:

"Of course she will. You needn't be gone long. I'll just look round the stables, meanwhile; and we'll have a glass of grog when you come back, Black. Run and put your things on, Bessie."

She tripped upstairs and put on her hat and jacket—her best, be sure—and came down again very quickly, her face radiant, her eyes shining. To have the aristocratic Mr. Black to tea was something, but to go walking with him in the High Street was something still greater.

"Give us half an hour or so, Nolly," said Stracey, as they went off.

Bessie seemed to walk on air, and the brightness and the gaiety of the High Street assumed quite a celestial aspect this evening, in her innocent eyes. And Mr. Black was as de-

lightful a companion out-of-doors as he was in; for he talked as he strolled along—not walking quickly, as if he were engaged in a match against time, as most of the Pentonville men did, but sauntering along, as if the crowded place belonged to him. And he actually stopped, of his own accord, to look at the shop-windows; and, having led Bessie into an admission that she admired a certain modest brooch in one of the jewellers' windows, he took her in and bought the little ornament, much to Bessie's blushing confusion.

"Oh, but I couldn't—I really couldn't!" she protested.

"Indeed you must," he said, pressing the case into her neatly gloved hand. "I meant to bring you back something from abroad; but I was so busy—and I left suddenly; you must let this take the place of it. I am sure your father won't mind; we're such old friends, you see."

What could Bessie say but murmur her thanks and put the precious, little trinket in her pocket with a hand that trembled not a little?

Once again the contrast between the two girls rose in Stracey's mind. In one case, it was a diamond bracelet; in the other, a two-penny-ha'-penny brooch; in the one case, his gift had been accepted with reluctance, costly though it was; in the other, the little present had been received with warm and blushing gratitude.

Now, it so happened that, as they emerged from the jeweller's—the man with an air of satisfaction on his face, the girl with radiant blushes on hers—John Warden, who was waiting outside the theatre, saw them quite plainly. He started and bit at his pipe, and, the sight of them having effectually spoiled his appetite for the drama, he turned away from the theatre and marched down one of the side-streets. Neither Bessie nor Stracey saw him; and Stracey having bought some cigarettes, they went a little farther up the High Street and then turned towards home. The girl's heart was throbbing with a happiness that was so keen as to be almost painful; and once, as Stracey took her arm to help through the crowd that is always collected at the Angel, she trembled all over. But she was not so absorbed in her felicity as not to be able to notice that her good-looking, well-dressed companion attracted the attention of the passers-by; and she was proud, as well as happy, in the thought that no girl in the High Street that night had so striking-looking a beau.

"I've had such a nice walk, father," she said, when they got home. "And look what Mr. Black has bought me! Isn't it kind of him?"

She put her arm round her father's shoulder as she showed him the brooch; and Nolly nodded and grunted, and looked from her to Stracey, as that gentleman said, with perfect self-possession:

"A mere trifle Miss Bessie happened to fancy."

"I should think you could find something better to do with your money than buying gee-gaws for a parcel of gels," Nolly grunted; but he was evidently pleased, though his one eye shot a keen glance at the donor.

It is not clear from which one of the three came the suggestion that the whiskey-and-water should be taken to the wooden bench that ran round the elm; but Stracey helped Bessie carry it out there, and the two men sat and smoked and drank in pleasant ease; Bessie passing to and fro between the house and the tree, and sometimes sitting down for a minute or two, listening to the soft voice of one of the speakers, and gazing dreamily at the shadow of the elm thrown by the moonlight—irony of fate—across the front of the workshop of John Warden, "Carpenter and Packing-Case Maker."

Presently, on one of the occasions on which she had flitted through the house, the postman came striding into the yard and handed a letter to Mr. Nolly. He opened it, and Stracey lit a match, so that he might read it. Having read it, Nolly swore.

"Anything the matter?" asked Stracey, with the amount of interest demanded by politeness.

"Yes; it's about that place of mine in the marshes," grumbled Nolly, scratching his bald head and regarding the letter with an air of annoyance. "You remember that place of mine, don't you, down there at Heydon? I thought I'd got rid of it; but the chap's just written to say that it won't suit him."

"Oh, yes, I remember it," said Stracey, with a short laugh. "I'm not surprised at anybody declining it; I should be more surprised if anybody had taken it."

"Well, I don't know," said Nolly, grudgingly. "It's a bit out of the way, perhaps."

"Well, I should think it was! If I remember rightly, we drove about four miles from the station; and when we got there it was a kind of 'Back of Beyond.' An awfully desolate place, a tumble-down shanty in the middle of a marsh without another house within sight, so far as I could see."

He gave a little shudder and shrugged his shoulders as he recalled the place.

"Well, it wasn't what you might call crowded," admitted

Nolly. "There weren't another house near it, as you say; but that didn't matter to me. You see, I bought it for a turn-out for any 'osses that might be wanting a bit of rest to set 'em on their pins again; an' I thought the house would do for a man to live in; but I could never get any fellow to stop there."

"I should think not," remarked Stracey.

"No," continued Nolly, squinting at his pipe, ruminatingly; "one chap I sent there went melancholy mad and bolted; and another took to drink and got D. T. and cut his throat. So I had to give the idea up and try and let the house. This man as thought of taking it wanted it for a private lunatic asylum; but he says in this letter that he's certain the authorities wouldn't license it. It's a doleful hole, I must say."

"I should think so," assented Stracey. "Why, you might commit a murder there—"

His soft voice ceased suddenly, his teeth closed over his cigarette, and, with a pallor slowly spreading over his sallow face, he gazed straight in front of him, with a vague horror in his eyes. The pallor slowly disappeared and the eyes resumed their usual furtive expression, were, indeed, more furtive than usual, as he flung the cigarette away and lit another.

"Yes; it's a doleful place enough," he said, after a pause. "But still it might suit somebody. It's strange, but now I come to think of it, I fancy I know someone who might take it of you."

"You don't say so? I'm precious glad to hear it! Who may it be?"

"Well, it's a friend of mine, at least an acquaintance; a man I met abroad. He goes in for chemistry experiments, and that kind of thing."

Nolly's one eye swung round sharply.

"Not one of those dynamite chaps?" he said. "Not that it would matter to me. I shouldn't be responsible."

"Oh, no; nothing of that kind," said Stracey, languidly, as if his interest in the subject had evaporated. "He is experimenting on a new dye or something of the sort, I believe."

"Ah, one of them things that kicks up a stink, I suppose?" remarked Nolly, thoughtfully.

"Yes; I imagine so. I know he was looking for an isolated place when I met with him," said Stracey, still more languidly. "He may have found it, for all I know; but if he

doesn't happen to have done so, I should imagine that place of yours at Heydon would just suit him."

"Do you think so?" queried Nolly. "Well, I'd let it to him at a low rent or sell it to him dirt cheap. Here, we'll make it a matter of business, if you like, Black; and I'll give you a commission, say ten per cent., on the rent or the purchase money. How will that suit you?"

Stracey was about to refuse the commission, but checked himself.

"Very well," he said. "I'll look my friend up, and let you know. I suppose the place is habitable?"

"Oh, yes," said Nolly, readily—too readily. "The roof may be a bit leaky, and some of the flooring is what you might call defective, and the windows might want a pane or two: that mad chap broke 'em, if I remember rightly. But I'll allow for that in the rent, or put the place to rights, if your friend prefers it."

Stracey thought for a moment.

"I rather fancy he would prefer to take the place as it is; he might want to alter it, fit it up in a way to suit his requirements. But, of course, I can't say. What rent shall I ask him?"

Nolly scratched his bald head and considered for a moment or two, then he said:

"Look here: I'll let the whole show—house and marshes—for thirty pounds a year."

Stracey laughed.

"I daresay you would. You'd better say five-and-twenty."

"Well, five-and-twenty, then," said Nolly. "You couldn't be more tight-fisted if you was taking the place yourself."

Stracey shot a glance at him sideways, then laughed.

"I should as soon think of taking a light-house," he said. "What on earth use would it be to me? Well, I'll tell my friend, and I'll let it for you, if I can. Here comes Miss Bessie. I must say good-night. By the way, Nolly, I wouldn't say anything to her about this house."

"Not me," said Nolly. "I never talk about business to women. I should have been in many a hole, if I had."

"Quite right," assented Stracey. "I'll come and tell you what my friend says about the affair."

He buttoned up his frock-coat in his slow, deliberate fashion, and stood waiting Bessie's approach, with a soft smile on his face, but with a little twitch of his lips, as if the appearance of the girl, with her innocent, blue eyes and golden

hair, had struck, like a sunbeam, across the darkness of his thoughts.

"I must be going, Miss Bessie," he said; "but I hope you will let me come and see you again soon. It is very pleasant to be here, to renew old times."

Blushingly she gave him her hand, and she blushed still more deeply as his long fingers closed over it and pressed it.

He said good-night to Nolly, and went out and left White Horse Lane in his slow, "gentlemanly" way.

Nolly looked after him, thoughtfully.

"What a nice gentleman Mr. Black is, father," said Bessie, in a low voice. "Aren't you glad he's come back?"

Nolly nodded and grunted.

"Oh, he's well enough," he said. "Go and get me some more whiskey."

When she had gone, he scratched his bald head again, half closed his one eye, and muttered:

"He wants that cheque back. He gave the girl a brooch. Now, is he really sweet on her or is it only the cheque?"

CHAPTER XVI.

WHEN Kyra recovered from her trance, she found Mrs. Froyte sitting beside her. The woman had been holding the girl's hand, but she dropped it as Kyra came back to consciousness.

"Are you better?" she asked, in her toneless voice, and looking, not at Kyra, but at the moon-cast shadows on the lawn.

Kyra drew a long breath and put her hand to her brow.

"I am quite well," she replied. "What has happened?"

She broke off with a faint cry and covered her eyes with her hands. The scene in the smoking-room had come back to her. She had asked her question and learned the truth. She was poor, not rich, as she had expected—and Lance le Breton! Oh, how greatly she had wronged him! It was not of herself she thought, at the first moment of realising her poverty, but of the man whom she had induced—yes, induced!—to marry her, under the impression that she would be able to bestow a fortune upon him. He had fulfilled his part of the contract; but she could not and never could fulfil hers.

She remembered the letter and felt in the pocket of her dress that she might read it again; but it was not there, and she could not see it lying near her, though she remembered *that she was reading it when she fell into the trance.*

"What are you looking for?" asked Mrs. Froyte.

"A letter—a letter Stracey just gave me. I had it in my hand, was reading it a few minutes before I fell asleep. I must have dropped it."

Mrs. Froyte looked about for it.

"It is not here," she said. "You must have returned it to Stracey."

Kyra put her hand to her head.

"I don't think so; but I may have done so."

She was silent a moment, then she turned to Mrs. Froyte with a natural craving for womanly sympathy, for help and encouragement.

"It was a letter from a lawyer, my father's lawyer, saying that I—I am poor, penniless," she said. "Did—did you know it? Oh, how could you let me go on living here, with you, in ignorance! Why didn't you tell me! It was **not** kind, it was not generous or fair to me!"

Mrs. Froyte gazed moodily before her.

"I did not know," she said. "I thought—but it does not matter what I thought. I do not know anything about business—"

"But they are your husband and son," Kyra broke in remonstratingly. "They ought to have told you—"

"My husband does not tell me anything," said Mrs. Froyte. "I am a mere nonentity, a chattel in the house. I should think you could have seen that for yourself. And as for Stracey, he is not my son."

"Not your son!" exclaimed Kyra, with surprise.

The woman bit her lip, as if she had said too much.

"I ought not to have told you," she said in a low voice.

"They would be angry—you will not tell them? Stracey is the son of Mr. Froyte's first wife—"

"His first wife? But why keep it secret?" said Kyra.

Mrs. Froyte frowned and looked round her nervously.

"There was a reason. I can't tell you. I must not, dare not, if you ask. Don't ask me."

Kyra shuddered.

"It is terrible, this air of secrecy, this atmosphere of mystery about you all!" she said.

Mrs. Froyte glanced at her swiftly.

"Are you going to marry Stracey?" she asked, furtively.

Kyra's face crimsoned, then went pale, as she shuddered.

"Oh, no, no!" she said, with feverish energy.

"But he has asked you: I know that."

"**Yes; but I have refused,**" responded Kyra.

Mrs. Froyte made a little gesture.

"That does not matter, that will not settle it," she said, with an air of conviction.

"But it will; it does," said Kyra. "He has accepted my refusal; besides"—her voice dropped to a tremulous whisper—"if he had not, it would be of no use. I cannot marry him; it is impossible, quite impossible! Please understand that! Nothing he could do or say would make it possible. Don't speak of it any more, please, Mrs. Froyte."

Mrs. Froyte moved her hand by way of assent; but it was evident that Kyra's assertion, positive as it was, had not carried conviction with it. There was silence for a minute or two, Kyra leaning forward with her head in her hands, her eyes fixed despairingly before her; then she turned to the woman with an appealing look and gesture.

"Mrs. Froyte, you have always been kind to me; sometimes I have thought you would have liked to be very kind, but that you were, for some reason or other, afraid to be so—yes, strange as it seems, actually *afraid*; but surely you must pity me! I am all alone—oh, I don't mean to be ungrateful!—but I have no father, no mother, and now I know that I am poor, that I have been living on your charity."

Mrs. Froyte's lips came together and she gripped one thin hand over the other nervously, as if she were fighting against the girl's appeal; and she stared straight before her, as if she could not meet the pathos in the lovely eyes.

"Of course, I cannot continue to do so," Kyra went on. "No girl with any self-respect, with any pride, could do so; and I think I am very proud, Mrs. Froyte. I must try and earn my own living. There must be some way. I am strong. I have had some sort of education. Surely, I could find something to do; perhaps some situation I could take! Will you not help me? I know so little. I am so ignorant of life here in England; and I have always thought that my father was rich—that I should be rich." She checked a sigh; she had already resolved not to bemoan her poverty. "But I know that here in England thousands of girls as young as I am, and perhaps as ignorant, are able to provide for themselves. It is not much I want, just enough to enable me to live, to be independent. You will help me, will you not?"

In her earnestness she put out her hand and touched Mrs. Froyte, who at once drew her hand away.

"There are many," she said; "but they are different to you. They have been brought up to work. They have learnt some trade, some business; most of them have begun to rely on

themselves from childhood. You have been watched over and cared for from the time of your birth till now—"

"Oh, but I am not so helpless as you make out!" Kyra broke in, earnestly. "And if I were, I must learn to rely on myself, as others have done. I cannot stay here. Advise me—"

"I cannot," she said, as if she were half distraught with fear and nervousness. "You must speak to James, to Stracey—but they will not let you go—" she broke off, as if inadvertently.

"Will not let me go!" echoed Kyra. "But why should they want to keep me living here with you—ah! *on* you—if I do not wish to, if I should be made wretchedly unhappy by staying?"

Mrs. Froyte rose, glancing towards the smoking-room window.

"I cannot tell you. I cannot help you," she said, hurriedly and almost inaudibly. "You must speak to them. I ~~can~~ do nothing, say nothing." Then, raising her voice, as the shadow of one of the men fell across the terrace: "You had better come to bed, Kyra; it is getting late."

Kyra leaned back with an air almost of defiance.

"I will come presently," she said, coldly. "Good-night, if you are going."

Mrs. Froyte opened her lips, then closed them again, and, with a stifled sigh, glided into the house. Kyra remained on the terrace for some little time longer, almost hoping that Mr. Froyte or Stracey might come out, so that she might at once speak of her future and inform them of her firm determination no longer to be a burden upon them. But neither of them approached her, and at last she went to her room.

Again, as she paced to and fro, her mind dwelt upon Lance le Breton, rather than her own painful position. What should she do? She promised to write and tell him if she discovered that she was rich; she would have to acquaint him with the fact that she had been building castles in the air, and that he would derive no benefit by marrying her.

Oh, if she could release him from the marriage-bond! But she could not do so. The most she could do would be to assure him that unless, by some miracle, she became rich, she would not remind him by word or look of the tie that bound them.

When the house was quite still—how still and noiseless it was, even in waking hours—she got some writing-materials

and wrote, with no difficulty—for there was no passion of love to make her hesitate and falter—the following letter:

“DEAR MR. LANCE LE BRETON,—I am not rich. I am quite poor. I write and tell you this at once. I need not say how sorry I am that I have misled you. Now that I have realised what I have done, how that I have clogged and perhaps ruined your life, I wish that I had not persuaded you to do what you have done. But it is too late. I was half mad with a dread that you cannot understand. But I will not urge any excuse; it is too late even for that. You will remember that I promised, as did you, that I would never remind you of the marriage, never tell anyone. Do not be afraid that I shall break that promise.”

She did hesitate as she came to the signature, and the blood rushed to her face as she thought that, if she signed it in full, she must write “Kyra le Breton;” but, by so writing it, she would, in the most obvious way, be reminding him of their marriage.

She signed it “Kyra” only.

The letter sounded to her, as she read it over, cold and even heartless; but she felt that to speak of her gratitude would seem like a mockery to the man she had unwittingly deceived; and, after pondering over it for awhile, she put it in an envelope and directed it to the address which Lance had given her.

It was so long before she got to sleep that she slept beyond her usual time; and when she came down the others had breakfasted.

“Stracey has gone up to London,” said Mrs. Froyte, in her usual tone; as if she desired to ignore their conversation of last night.

Kyra made no remark, but seeing Mr. Froyte in the garden, went out to him, after she had drunk a cup of tea; she could not eat anything. He pretended that he did not see her and made off down one of the side-paths to the shrubbery; but as Kyra followed him he stopped and waited for her with a kind of nervous resolution.

“Good-morning, my dear Kyra,” he said. “I trust you are better this morning—”

“I am quite well,” she said. “Please do not go away for a moment. I want to speak to you, Mr. Froyte. I came to tell you that I have resolved to—to earn my own living.”

“You—you can’t be serious, my dear Kyra,” he faltered, as if shocked.

"Yes, I am; as serious as I was last night when I said the same thing," said Kyra, with a sad smile. "Why should I not—and, please don't try and argue with me—you are very kind to ask me to remain with you, but—but it is impossible. I want you to realise that, and to continue your kindness by helping me to find some way of supporting myself."

He fumbled with his watch-chain with a hand that, as she saw, trembled.

"There is really no cause for such a course," he stammered. "Of course, I understand and admire the feeling that prompts you to desire to be independent, but, my dear Kyra, your father was one of my oldest friends—I have no daughter—your presence in the house is very sweet to us—"

His eyes fell under the direct gaze of the great, sad ones, and the weak thread of his expostulation broke off.

"Well—well," he said, preparing to turn away, "at any rate, there is no hurry. We—we must talk it over with Stracey; yes, with Stracey; he is your father's executor, you know."

"But my father left no money," said Kyra, quickly, but with a kind of resigned impatience. "There is no reason why Stracey should—should attempt to make any change in my mind! Will you not help me, Mr. Froyte, for—for my father's sake?"

"Yes, yes! Certainly—certainly!" he said. "Come—come, you must not distress yourself, my dear Kyra."

She smiled, with something like bitterness in her heart.

"I shall cease to distress myself the moment I can find some way of earning my own living."

"We will talk it over with Stracey," he said, and shuffled down the path.

Kyra got her hat and jacket, and went down to the post-office. As usual, Mrs. Froyte watched her from one of the windows; and Kyra saw Mr. Froyte peering over the hedge after her. But this morning their spying on her did not affect her, did not cause the usual feeling of resentment; for it seemed to her that she was approaching her freedom.

As she was putting Lance's letter in the box, she heard some dogs barking behind her, and, turning, saw Lady May coming down the street. She was walking rather slowly, and her face was graver than usual, even sad, as it seemed to Kyra; but at sight of Kyra it brightened and she almost ran up to her, the dogs barking and yelping in sympathy with the sudden change of her mood.

"Oh, Kyra, I am so glad! I was coming to see you to—

day. Will you come for a walk with me? Just a little way! Do! Let me post these letters. Down, Glen! Down, Floss! There, they've made paw-marks on your dress, Kyra! They always do; look at mine. Lance says I spoil all the dogs and horses I come in contact with; and he brought me this whip; but they don't mind it, though the sight of it in his hand keeps them in order. How pale you are this morning, dear! Aren't you feeling well?" she added, looking up at Kyra with affectionate regard.

"I am quite well," said Kyra, as they walked up the village street.

"Let's go round by the church," said May; "it's too hot to walk far. I know a place where we can sit and talk."

The place was the stile where Lance and Kyra had talked—to what a tragic purpose! A blush rose quickly to Kyra's face, but vanished as quickly, and she stifled a sigh. May climbed on to the gate and pointed to the bottom steps of the stile for Kyra.

"I'm so awfully glad to see you, dear," she said, with a sigh, "for I'm feeling so—so out of sorts and lonely. I've got a terrible fit of the blues. I suppose you don't know what that is? You always look so calm and serene, you know."

"What has happened, why are you feeling lonely?" asked Kyra, ignoring May's assertion of her belief in Kyra's immunity from attacks of depression.

"Oh, I suppose it's Lance going," said May, swinging her long legs and gazing mournfully at them. "I say 'I suppose,' but of course it is. You can't tell how I miss him! He was just like—like a flash of sunshine in the house. It was quite different while he was there. And now he's gone, it's as dull and lonesome as ever. Poor old Lance! You can't tell how fond of him I am, Kyra; indeed, I didn't know myself, until he had gone, how fond I was. He was awfully sorry to go, too. The last day or two he was quite strange, as if he was beginning to realise that he was going for years, and that he shouldn't see us for ever so long."

She drew a tremendous sigh and looked at Kyra for sympathy.

"Why, do you know, dear, I met him wandering about Benstead on the morning of the day he went, and he looked quite wild and off his head; and"—she lowered her voice—"I really believe that he had been—drinking. He said that he had been taking some brandy for the toothache: as if Lance ever had the toothache! Oh, dear, I wish he could have stayed in England! It's always the best of the boys

who go out to those beastly colonies or those horrid, little wars!"

Kyra's head drooped and she put up her hand as if to screen her face from the sun. Again there rose before her the sight of Lance le Breton's pale, set face as he had stood facing her at the moment of their parting.

"Oh, by the way," May went on, after a pause. "I am sure he liked you, Kyra. Do you know that he asked me to drive him past the Elms—I suppose he thought he might see you and say 'good-bye,' perhaps be able to just wave his hand. And what's more, he asked me to see you, to be friends with you, because, he said, you didn't seem to have many friends and might feel lonely. It was thoughtful of him, wasn't it, dear? You don't mind?"

"No, I don't mind," said Kyra, in a low voice. "Yes, it was kind of Mr. le Breton."

"Poor old Lance!" breathed May again. "There's no one like him. What do you think he gave me just before he went. Look!" She tore off her well-worn buckskin gauntlet and held up her hand. "Isn't it a pretty ring?"

"Very," said Kyra, and her face paled a little as she remembered the ring Lance had bought for her, the ring which she had given back to him.

"And it's a very good one; I believe it cost ever so much; and dear old Lance hasn't too much money. Now, wasn't it good of him? I was very nearly piping my eye when he gave it me; and I kissed him when he put it on: I made him do that, and I shall never take it off: I don't care if the stones do come out with washing. I'll keep it on so that I can tell him when he does come back. You would, wouldn't you, Kyra, if such a dear old boy had given you a ring?"

"Yes," said Kyra, with a strange feeling of loneliness, of—was it jealousy? Oh, no, it could not have been.

"How quietly you said that," mused May, contemplating the beautiful, downcast face curiously. "Kyra, I can imagine that if you ever fell in love, you'd fall, well, very deep."

"Can you?" said Kyra, in a low voice and with a smile. "Perhaps I shall never fall in love."

"Oh, won't you?" retorted May, with an air of conviction. "You wait until Mr. Right Man comes along! You'll see!"

Kyra smiled again.

"Well, I will wait," she said, with a smile of sad irony.

"Oh, dear, I must go," said May, with a sigh. "I was let off to post a letter—it was to Lance; it's mail-day to-day, you

know—and it will be, 'Pray, Lady May, do you always require so long a time to go and return from the post-office? Yes; I must go, or I sha'n't be let off again. You'll come and see me, Kyra, dear? and I'll come to you whenever I can, on my half-holidays. Fancy having 'half-holidays' like a kid at a board-school! I shall tell Lance, in my next letter, that I've seen you; and, oh, Kyra," she laughed, "I'll tell him that you said I ought to keep his ring on my finger till he comes back. Oh, you need not blush so; he'll only laugh," she pouted—then burst into a laugh herself. "Lance always treats me as if I were a child in arms; he never realises that I am almost grown up. Yes, Kyra, dear, you do look pale, paler than usual. I shall tell Doctor Graham to look after you."

They walked together to the end of the lane, then May tore herself away and Kyra turned in at the Elm gate. It was mail-day: Lance le Breton would get both the letters at the same time. What would he think, what would he feel, when he read hers?

She met Mrs. Froyte in the hall: there was a telegram in her hand.

"Stracey is not coming home to-night," she said in her expressionless way.

Kyra sighed a little impatiently. She was disinclined to wait even a day before speaking to him.

He returned on the following evening. To Kyra, as he entered the drawing-room dressed for dinner, he seemed more furtive and on his guard even than usual.

"I am so glad to get back," he remarked generally, but looking at Kyra. "London is simply insufferable. What have you been doing with yourself, Kyra?" he asked, with his suave smile.

"Thinking," said Kyra, quietly and gravely. "Stracey, will you help me to find some way of earning my living?"

She expected him to meet the sudden request with some plausible and evasive speech, some soft assurance of the impossibility of her doing so; but, to her surprise, he nodded gravely.

"So you have resolved to be independent, independent of us, Kyra?" he said. "Well, I'm not surprised. I, too, have been thinking, and I can understand how unwelcome, how unpleasant, the idea of dependence must be to you, who are so—shall I say—proud? Of course, I think you are wrong, that the idea is—is quixotic and overstrained. But your happiness is of the greatest moment to me—to us"—he glanced

at Mr. and Mrs. Froyte, who sat looking at him, the woman with a kind of stony constraint, the man with an air of watchful apprehension. "And if you have quite made up your mind, if you are quite resolved—"

"I have—I am," said Kyra, swiftly.

"Well, then, Kyra, dear, I think I can help you."

"How—" she began, with a sudden flush, a sudden light in her eyes.

But he held up his finger with playful gravity.

"No, no; not now. You must give me time to think over my little plan. Just a few days—a few days. You will wait till then, Kyra?"

"Yes, I will wait," she said, her face still flushed with the prospect of independence, of more—freedom! "And I am very grateful to you, Stracey," she added, impulsively.

He nodded again and smiled at her softly; but there was no smile on either James Froyte's face or the face of his wife. On that of the former there was, instead, a subtle expression of dread, as if he were asking himself what new and sinister move the smiling Stracey was contemplating.

CHAPTER XVII.

AFTER that visit of Mr. Black's, Bessie's song outdid the thrush's in joyousness; indeed, the girl and the bird seemed to be singing all day against each other, as if in a match; the yard was full of their melody and John Warden often found it difficult to work because the sound of his hammer and plane drowned the voice which was the sweetest of all music in his ears.

And Bessie's face was as joyous as her voice. John would often look up from his work and across the yard to where she stood feeding the pigeons, or watering the flowers in the window-sill, or shaking the crumbs from the tablecloth, and see her smiling, as if she had suddenly discovered that this world was the best of all possible worlds in which a girl could live.

Sometimes, as if he were drawn by the magic of her prettiness and radiant spell of her joyousness, he would drop his tools and saunter across to her—not straight across, but making a *détour* of the yard and stopping to speak to the cat or to look at the tree with critical gravity as if it had suddenly shot out some extraordinary and phenomenal leaves—and would lean against the doorway, as working-men always lean when they are not at work, and talk to her.

And Bessie always seemed glad to see him and talk to him; but John noticed that she scarcely looked at him for more than a minute or two together, and that her blue eyes—and how bright they were now—wandered from his face and fixed themselves dreamily on the patch of sky above the yard, or on the tree or the gateway, as if she were only half listening to him and her mind were wandering away from him like her eyes; and every now and then while they were talking, her hand—the hand that seemed so ridiculously and yet so sweetly small to John of the huge fists—would go up to the little gold brooch at her neck, and she would touch it absently but lovingly.

The brooch was a new one, he knew—for did he not know by heart every modest little trinket she possessed?—and now and again the suspicion that the tall, dark fellow had given it to her— But John drove the thought from him: surely he would not dare to do so, surely things had not gone so far! And yet—John had seen them coming out of the jeweller's together; but he tried to quell the jealousy which weighed upon him like a ton weight, with the hope that Mr. Black had been buying something for himself. Surely Bessie, pretty, prim Bessie, would not accept a present of jewellery from a man unless she were engaged to him! And she was not that, or as surely she would have told John, John her old play-mate and school-fellow.

He thought of her all day as he was at his work and all the evening while he smoked his pipe in the little, old-fashioned "parlour" of the Raven and Crow round the corner; and doubtless he would have dreamed of her at night, if he had not been too tired after his day's work to dream of anything, even of Bessie.

Many and many a time he made up his mind to walk straight across, not by a roundabout way, but straight across, and tell her of his love and ask her to be his wife. He used to rehearse it, and it went sometimes like this: "Bessie, my girl, you and I have knowed each other for several years"—that sounded better, he thought, than "since we were boy and girl," because, you see, she was really only a girl still; "business is good and I've saved a bit o' money: what should you say to being my wife and moving across the street?"

But, at times, this seemed too cold and business-like, and he framed the proposal in more sentimental language, such as he had read in the fiction of his weekly paper or heard the heroes of the drama disclaim, language of which this is a fair sample:

"Bessie, through long, long years I have worshipped at the shrine of your beauty, with a love as constant and true as it is warm. If you will deign to reward my devotion with one glance of love, there will not be a happier man in all England than John Warden."

Even this speech, beautifully as it sounded from the stage, was open to objection; but, for want of a better, he got it off by heart; and one afternoon, having repeated it a score of times, staring before him at the stack of wood opposite his work-bench, he dropped his saw suddenly as if he were afraid his courage and resolution would ooze away, as they had so often done before; and, tucking one end of his apron into his waist, strode across to where Bessie was standing on one of the kitchen chairs putting a fresh sod of turf into the thrush's cage. Both she and the bird were singing, and Bessie's note was so blithe and gay that even before he reached her John's heart misgave him, his courage fled, and, with the carefully learnt and many times rehearsed speech buzzing in his head, he stood speechless before her.

"Oh, is that you, John?" she said, just glancing down at him and pursing her lips at the thrush in a manner that almost drove poor John mad—for it was so much like a proffered kiss. "I'm afraid business must be slack: you seem to have so much time on your hands."

This was the third time John had wandered across the yard that afternoon.

He flushed, but the words gave him his cue, and, mixing up the sentimental and the practical forms, he dashed at it.

"Bessie," he said, feeling as if he had suddenly contracted a severe bronchial cold which threatened to deprive him of his breath, "for many long years—business is good, and I've saved a bit o' money; what should you say—that is, Bessie, for many long years I have worshipped—if you would deign"—his honest eyes wandered distressfully from her face, eloquent of amazement, and settled for an anguished moment on the pigeons pecking at the oats between the cobble-stones; but the pigeons flew away and carried the remainder of John's carefully prepared speech with them; and in desperation his eyes, with the man's prayer and appeal in them, came back to Bessie's, and something in his rapt gaze set her heart beating, and put her instantly into a mental attitude of defence. She paused in her occupation and looked over the cage and straight away into vacancy, and waited.

"It's this way, Bessie," said John, moistening his lips and wiping his hot hands on his corduroy trousers, as he did when

he was dealing with that troublesome matter, glue. "You and I have known each other for a long time, ever since we was boy and girl—you might say, if you was inclined to be particular, ever since we was infants in arms. You know me and I know you; and that being so, and all things being agreeable and comfortable—Bessie, my gel, I've always thought you the prettiest gel in Pentonville."

"Oh, John!" she murmured, with an air of repudiation and distress. "I'm sure there's many—"

"Not for me!" said John, suddenly losing his bashfulness and finding his tongue. "Not for me, Bessie. Ever since I can remember there's only been one gel for me, and that's you. Don't you call to mind, how, when we was kids at school, I always shared my apples and brandy balls with you? I remember that day Bill Simmons pushed agen you, how I wallopped him—but that's neither here nor there. But you'll own as we were allus together, Bessie, work-day and Sunday. We used to sit under the tree there Sundays learning our lessons and playin' with the cat—not this one, but its mother, or was it its grandmother? I ain't sure. And I've watched you grow up—mind that bird don't fly out, Bessie, you've got the door too wide open and he might be gone any minute—"

Bessie closed the door and descended from the chair—which she put between her and John—and he went on:

"As I was sayin', I've watched you grow up; and you've grown up within my heart, so to speak. Why, I've watched you day by day, across the yard here, and it's been as if you was part of my life; and so you are, Bessie; leastways, life wouldn't be the same without your pretty face to look across it, and your sweet, pretty voice to listen to. Times out o' number I've put down the tools to listen—ah, many's the hour I've lost, doin' nothin' but listen, listen."

"I'm sorry—you should have wasted your time, John," murmured Bessie, much distressed.

"It hasn't been waste o' time," said John, with greater truth than he knew; for to love is to make the best of our time, even though we should love in vain. "It's just made life sweet to me. Why, it's been like the sight of the old elm, or the pidgeons, or the cat sittin' there in the sunshine. Don't speak of waste o' time, Bessie, it's just been the sunshine and happiness of my life to look at and listen to you. And is it any wonder that I've grown to love you? Why, come to that, when haven't I loved you? There ain't any time that I can call to mind that I haven't. And"—he paused and wiped the perspiration from his brow with the back of his huge hand

—"and so I am come back to what I said at first: if you can see your way to being my wife, to crossin' the yard and joining the carpentary-and-packing-case business, I—I—should be much obliged, and your answer"—he recalled the words on his business-cards and added, as by a happy inspiration—"your answer will be gratefully received. I'll do my best to make you happy."

He stopped and stood waiting, his pipe—long since out—clenched in his hand; and Bessie stood, the picture of distress.

For she knew that so much of what he had said was true. They *had* been friends from childhood; she knew that he had loved her from even more early days; he was as honest as the day, and he *would* do his best to make her happy. Young and inexperienced as she was, she knew with that intuition which is woman's birthright, that if she could accept him, she would be doing wisely. But—ah, gentle reader, there is generally a "but" in all such calculations!—as she looked at him with a timid, sideway glance, and noted his honest, good-looking face, the huge, sinewy arm, bare to the elbow, the great strong hands, there rose before her, totally eclipsing him, the thin, "gentlemanly" form, and sallow, romantic face of Mr. Black; and her simple heart wavered and turned away from the man who had been her lover since childhood's days.

"I'm very sorry, John," she faltered.

"Sorry?" he echoed, with a kind of dull start. "You mean—you don't mean—"

"Yes, I do, John. It can't be. I'm—oh, I've not thought of being married—"

"But you're grown up," he said, persuasively. "Why, Lor'! it's nigh upon three years since you've had your hair up."

"Three years come next Christmas," said Bessie, absently. "I don't mean that. P'r'aps I am old enough to think of such things; but, John, I never thought— You said we had been such *friends*, you know. I'd no idea that—that you regarded me in that light."

"Oh, Bessie, Bessie!"

"And—and I'm sure it wouldn't do. Why, we've been almost like brother and sister—"

"Not me," said John, thickly. "I've always looked forward to the time when you'd be my wife."

She shook her head.

"I'm sorry, real sorry, John; but, oh! it couldn't be. I—I don't care for you—least not in that way."

"How long since?" he asked. "You used not to mind when I called you my little wife."

"That was when I was a child," she pleaded. "Who thinks of what children say? They don't mean anything."

"I meant it," he said, doggedly. "But I see how it is, Bessie. Times has altered; there's others. You've changed to me lately—ever since—"

He stopped, as if half afraid to voice his dread suspicion.

"Ever since what?" demanded Bessie, with a red spot on either cheek. And, if John had been a wise man, he would have dropped the conversation, closed the interview there and then, and marched back to his work, to wait for a more convenient and more auspicious opportunity. But when was a man in love wise? Not since the time of Adam, who accepted a bite of the fatal apple; and, of course, John went on.

"Since that Mr. Black came here," he said, looking over her head into space, with a darkening eye.

The blood rushed to Bessie's face, then left it all the paler for its transient visit.

"What has Mr. Black to do with it?" she said, with unnatural calm.

"Seems to me he has got a good deal to do with it; seems to me he has come atween you an' me, Bessie," said John, the bronchial affection attacking him again and making his voice thick and morose. "Don't say that he hasn't, for I've noticed the change in you ever since he took to coming here. I noticed how much store you set upon his visits—"

"Oh!" broke in Bessie, with a note of indignant question in her clear voice. "So I can't be civil to an old friend of my father's—"

"—I'm an old friend of your father's," John reminded her, in a sullen way. "And you never made the fuss over me as you've made over him. And then he went," he continued, as if he were mentally following a panorama, "and you changed again and was more friendly with me, and then the other night, the night you'd promised to go to the play with me, he come back and you went back on your promise."

"I offered to go with you even then," said Bessie, crimsoning, but evading his honest, anguished eyes.

"Yes, you did in a fashion. But I'm a man, though I'm in love with you, Bessie; and I didn't take an advantage. And then, as I was waiting outside the Grand I saw you—and him—comin' down the High Street, a smilin' as if—as if—"

Oh, Bessie, what does it mean? Do 'ee listen to me as loves the very ground you walks on! What do you know of this—Mr. Black? He wears a black coat—he's a swell, if you like—but what do you know of him—"

"He's—he's—an old friend of my father's," faltered Bessie. "He's a—a gentleman, and you ought to be ashamed of yourself, John, to—to—go behind his back—"

"I don't go behind his back. I'd say the same to his face. A gentleman, is he? Well, then, what's he doin' here in White Horse Lane? It ain't no place for gentlemen. We're all hard-workin', honest folk down here; your father's a 'oss-dealer, and I'm a carpenter, and you're his daughter. This ain't no place for gentlemen. Besides, who says he's one? He's dressy, and lardy-dardy in his ways; but I ain't sure that he's the real thing. P'r'aps I don't know; but I do know, I feel, that he's after no good—"

At this moment a cab drove up to the archway and Bessie crimsoned to the roots of her golden hair. Mr. Black had alighted and was paying the driver.

"Then you'd better tell him so," she said, almost viciously; "for here is Mr. Black."

John swung round and surveyed, with a strange mixture of sorrow and foreboding, the frock-coated figure as it came slowly across the yard.

"Yes; here he is; him that's come between us. God forgive me, if I've wronged him in thought and estimate; but I *have* made my estimate. And, Bessie—no, you needn't look scared, I'm not going to pick a quarrel with him—though I could knock the sawdust out of the fine gentleman—but—but, if ever you should learn the truth about him, if ever you should want a friend—"

Bessie—her eyes shining, her cheeks radiant, with a blush for the coming Mr. Black—broke in upon the deep voice:

"You talk like a man in a play, John! If you've anything to say to Mr. Black, you'd best say it to him to his face. How do you do, Mr. Black? This is an old friend of ours, Mr. John Warden."

Stracey raised his hat and smiled, and John touched his paper-cap and frowned. He also opened his mouth; but, as if he had thought better of it, he closed his lips again and strode back across the yard to his workshop.

Stracey did not appear to notice John's or Bessie's agitation, which latter was quickly dispelled by the magic of "Mr. Black's" presence. He did not seem at all disappointed at *hearing that her father was not in yet*, and he took his accus-

tomed chair and talked to her, while she moved to and fro or paused to lean over the back of a chair with her hands clasped loosely.

Stracey thought her prettier than ever that afternoon: perhaps he guessed why she looked so happy and as if the sunshine were reflected in her blue eyes. He talked of himself—he could not have chosen a more welcome and agreeable subject for Bessie—and told her how he was acting as London agent for several Continental merchants, whose acquaintance he had made during his travels, and he implied that he was successful and getting on in the world.

"It must be so delightful to travel, to see foreign places and people!" Bessie remarked, with a wistful, little sigh. "I often feel as old as Methuselah here in the yard, and as if I didn't know anything. Not that I'm not fond enough of it—oh, yes, indeed I am! I love every inch of it, and if anyone told me that I was going to leave it and never come back, I should break my heart; but when I think of all those beautiful places you've seen and talk about, why, it does seem as if—as if I'd like to see them for myself."

"Perhaps you may some day, Miss Bessie," he said in his soft, ingratiatory voice.

"It's not very likely," she remarked, with a pout.

"Oh, I don't know. One never knows what the future may hold for one," he said, with a smile. "Perhaps you may see Paris and Berlin and Rome, like the rest of us."

"Oh, if I could think so!" she murmured, drawing a long breath. "But how—how satisfied and happy you must feel, Mr. Black, having travelled so much!"

It was Stracey's turn to sigh, and he heaved a long and deep one as he responded:

"Oh, I don't know. I often feel very lonely in the solitude of my rooms in Gray's Inn; and they are very solitary and dull. Sometimes I don't know what to do with myself, the time hangs so heavy on my hands. I can't tell you how grateful I am to you—to your father—for allowing me to come and see you, as I used in the old times."

"Allowing you!" murmured Bessie. "I hope you know that I—father—is always glad to see you."

"Thank you, very much!" he said, softly. "But my visits here only make the solitude of my rooms seem more intense and intolerable."

Bessie coloured with pleasure, and left her unconscious pose over the chair to see to the fire in the next room, where the kettle was singing blithely. His solitude: did he mean any-

thing by it? Oh, how glad, how proud she would be to share his solitude, to share his whole life, whether it were of joy or sorrow, of failure or success, of poverty or riches!

Stracey smiled to himself, and lit a cigarette when she had gone—smoking was *de rigueur* at all times at Mr. Nolly's abode—and thought how pretty she was, and how really well she would look, say, at a bachelor-dinner or smoking-party in a snug, little villa in St. John's Wood.

She came back presently—very soon, indeed—and the conversation was resumed. Without saying so in so many words, without, in fact, committing himself in any way, Stracey, with an art which would have received recognition in Hades, led the innocent, unsophisticated Bessie to believe that he had been thinking of her since his last visit, and that, if ever he should seek a companion for his solitude, he would seek her in White Horse Lane. And it was high art, art of the very highest—or deepest. Listen to him, as he draws the picture of life in Paris:

"It is a city as beautiful as a dream, Miss Bessie. All the public buildings are of white stone; and the streets, broad and long, are lined with trees, such trees as you do not see in England. And there are squares and terraces, with fountains playing on them—not at odd times, as they do in Trafalgar Square, but all the time. And there is a broad road leading to a great arch of marble, with open spaces on each side; and there, amongst the trees, you can walk and sit in fine weather and listen to bands of music and open-air concerts, in which the most famous of singers appear. And then there are the shops! There are miles of them!"

"Like London, Regent Street," murmured Bessie, her blue eyes fixed on his dark, sinister ones.

"Oh, much finer!" he said, with gentle consideration for her ignorance. "For instance, there is one place—quite a large place—in which there are no other shops than jewelers, jewellers with hundreds of thousands of pounds of diamonds and other precious stones displayed in their windows. It is called the Palais Royal. Then there are the Grand Opera and the theatres. Oh, you have no idea of their number and their magnificence! And there are balls and concerts, to which one can go every day, every night, if one cares to do so. And one doesn't need to be a very great personage to enjoy all this. You and I, for instance—only for instance—could join in it all, and no one would think it strange or—or dissipated, as they would do in England. Life is just one round of gaiety and happiness in Paris. Ah, dear

me! I wish we were there, Miss Bessie—I mean, I wish you and I happened to be there together, that I might show you all the sights and take you to all the places. And then there's the places in Switzerland—Lucerne, for one; such a beautiful place, beside a lovely lake that is emerald-green one moment and sapphire-blue the next, surrounded by great, violet mountains, some of them snow-capped—”

“I should like that,” murmured Bessie.

In simple truth, she would have liked any of the places he described so eloquently, if she could have seen them in his company.

“Yes, I think you would,” he said, in his soft, insidious voice.

“And there are steamers sailing on the lake; and you go on board with a basket of fruit; and a band is playing; and you listen to it while you look at the snowy Alps glistening in the sunshine—”

“And you've been there and seen it all!” breathed Bessie, with a delicious awe and admiration of the man who had witnessed such sights and participated in such delights. “How happy you must have been!”

“Yes,” he replied, “and, yet, not happy. I always felt so lonely and solitary. If I had had someone with me, some sympathetic companion. I'm sure you understand, Bessie?” He dropped the “miss;” and Bessie noticed it, of course, and blushed with shy pleasure. “I say if I could have had some one who could have shared it with me—but I feel that you understand, Bessie.”

He leant forward, his dark eyes fixed on hers, which suddenly became downcast, as a blush stained her face, a blush of doubtful joy.

“All the pleasure in the world is of no avail if you are doomed to take it in solitude,” he went on. “What one wants, pines for, is a sympathetic companion—”

“Here's father!” Bessie said, with a kind of gasp, as Mr. Nolly rode into the yard, and at sight of Mr. Black, waved his hand, and, dismounting and giving his horse to the stableman—painfully sober at this moment—entered the house.

“Ah, Black, how are ye? Well, Bessie, my gel! Tea ready? Not quite, eh? That's Mr. Black's fault, I'll be sworn. Well, get it quick, for I've had a devil of a day—seems to me as if every darned Cockney knows as much about a 'oss as I do! Here's this one I bought to-day, with two splints and touched in his wind, a-fetchin' as much as if he

was as sound as a grand piano! But never mind! I think I got the best of 'em, after all. An' so I ought, or else what's the use of bein' brought up to the trade? And how are yer, Black? Glad to see yer. Been havin' a palaver with Bessie? Well, you couldn't 'ave a nicer or a straighter gel to palaver with; mark that, as they says in the billiard-rooms."

It was evident that Mr. Nolly had been drinking. He was by no means intoxicated, the liquor he had taken simply having loosened his tongue.

"An' how's business?" he enquired, when, after a clean up, he seated himself at the tea-table and reached forward for a slice of his beloved hot-buttered toast.

Bessie happened to be out of the room and Stracey replied to the point.

"I've seen my friend," he said. "And he is willing to take that place of yours at Heydon."

"You don't say!" said Nolly. "Well, I'm glad to hear it. Buy it?"

"No; rent it," said Stracey. "He will take it for a year—"

"I shall want references. Why, dash it all, I don't even know his name!" remarked Nolly, with emphasis.

"His name is Schmidt," Stracey said, languidly. "Doctor Schmidt. He is a professor of Heidelberg—"

"I don't care a d— for that!" exclaimed Nolly. "Is he good for the coin, the rent?"

"Quite good," replied Stracey. "In fact, he had some difficulty in finding English references, so he gave me a year's rent in advance. And I asked him thirty pounds and got it."

Nolly leant forward and smacked him on the back.

"Bravo, you!" he cried. "Thirty pounds! That's what I call business!"

Stracey took six five-pound notes from his pocket and laid them on the table, and Nolly took them up and regarded them with anything but complimentary scrutiny.

"All right, eh?" he asked.

Stracey laughed easily.

"Oh, quite all right," he said. "In fact, I'll cash one of them as my commission."

He took some gold from his pocket. Nolly chuckled and flicked a note across the table to him.

"You are smart, Black!" he said, with an air of satisfaction. "I never thought I should get rid of that Heydon place; it's the cruellest spot 'twixt here and blazes. Here, I'll

hand you one of these fivers back for your commission. Yea, it's the cruellest spot—"

"Yes, it is," said Stracey, as he folded the bank-note and put it into his pocket-book. "And you are very lucky to get a tenant for it. But I ought to tell you that my friend, Doctor Schmidt, makes a condition."

"Yes; what is it?" asked Nolly.

"Well, he is terribly afraid lest some one should spy on him and discover the secret of the experiments he is making, and he makes it a condition of his tenancy that you shall leave him in undisturbed possession."

"Eh?" said Nolly, as if he did not understand; then he arrived at Stracey's meaning, and nodded emphatically.

"Right you are! You tell him that so long as he pays his rent, I sha'n't interfere with him, and I don't know who else there is to do so. He can go on making his experiments until he blows himself up, for all I care. The rent's what I want, and so long as he pays that, he can stay till doomsday. Hi, Bessie, give Mr. Black some more tea. No more? Then we'll go and sit outside under the tree; and Bessie can join us. It's quite like bein' in the country; and it's a good idea, whoever it was, to 'ave our pipes and our drop of drink in the open."

"It was Mr. Black's," said Bessie.

"Indeed, no; it was Miss Bessie's," Mr. Black declared; and they argued it with much warmth and persistence on both sides.

Stracey remained for some time; and Mr. Nolly, being in a good-humour, was half inclined to hand over a certain cheque which he knew his young friend most ardently desired; but Nolly was only half inclined and as Stracey did not mention it, though Nolly expected him to do so every moment, nothing was said about it. Before he went Mr. Black remarked how pleasant it would be to pay a visit to the Zoological Gardens while this fine weather lasted; and when Bessie, with a quick, shy glance, agreed with him, he said, in his soft, persuasive voice, that perhaps Miss Bessie would give him the honour and pleasure of her company some afternoon.

Long after he had gone, Bessie sat under the tree, her head leaning against the trunk, her eyes fixed on the sky, her hands clasped loosely in her lap, all unconscious that John was watching her sadly from the workshop-loft, unconscious of everything save the vision of an afternoon at the Zoological Gardens with Mr. Black beside her.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ONE evening about a week later Kyra was sitting on the verandah with a book in her hand; but the page had not been turned for some time and her eyes had been fixed on the sunset. She was thinking of Stracey's promise to help her to find something to do, some way of earning her own living. Since the afternoon on which he had agreed to her leaving the Elms and going out into the world he had not referred to the subject; but he had been away nearly all the time and Kyra was hoping that he was looking out for some employment for her. She would have asked Mrs. Froyte, but she knew that Mrs. Froyte would refuse to give her any information, and she shrank from causing the woman a repetition of the pain and embarrassment which she had shown on a previous occasion, on the occasion when she had, in an unguarded moment, told Kyra that she, Mrs. Froyte, was not Stracey's mother.

Mrs. Froyte was sitting beside her, doing some plain needlework; not a word had passed between them for some time, and Kyra was so lost in reverie that when Mrs. Froyte started and looked up, she started also.

"What is it?" she asked.

"It is Stracey," said Mrs. Froyte, in her subdued voice.

"I hear no one," said Kyra; but a moment or two afterwards he opened the gate and came across the lawn.

He had been absent for two days, and it seemed to Kyra that he looked somewhat preoccupied if not anxious, though he smiled as suavely as usual, as he greeted them.

"How pleasant it is here after that beastly London!" he said, dropping softly into a chair beside Kyra and taking off his hat.

"Have you had any dinner?" asked Mrs. Froyte.

"Yes, thanks; but I should like a cup of coffee, if it wouldn't be troubling you too much."

When Mrs. Froyte had left them, he turned to Kyra, with a smile:

"Are you still determined to leave us, Kyra?" he asked.

"I am determined to earn my own living, Stracey," she replied; "and to do that I must leave the Elms and go into the world. I was going to ask you—"

"I know," he said, with a nod. "I have seen it in your face. I suppose you thought I had forgotten my promise?"

But I had not. I have been looking out for some employment for you—that is what has taken me to London so often this week; and I think I have some news for you.”

Kyra turned to him eagerly.

“I am very glad, very grateful!”

“Better wait and see if the thing is good enough,” he said, with a little shrug of his shoulders. “You can’t imagine how difficult it is to obtain a situation, any kind of work, nowadays; there are so many applicants and so few vacancies; and the fact that you are, by circumstances, unfitted for most of the berths which women fill, makes it more difficult.”

“Yes, I know; I can quite understand that,” said Kyra; “and therefore, I shall be most grateful for anything, however unsuitable it may seem to you. I am not afraid of work; I only want enough money to enable me to live.”

“Oh, it’s not as bad as that,” said Stracey, grudgingly. “Of course, in my opinion, it is not worth your accepting—but it is no use discussing that. I feel that it would be useless to remonstrate with you.”

At this moment James Froyte came from the smoking-room, and with a murmured “So you’re back, Stracey?” leant against the wall, listening with downcast eyes, which he raised, now and again, to glance furtively at Stracey.

“I was just telling Kyra,” he said, “that, in accordance with my promise, I have been trying to find her something to do, and that I have succeeded in obtaining a situation for her—a nice word in connection with Kyra!—and I sincerely hope that she will refuse it.”

“A situation?” echoed James Froyte, huskily; but Kyra’s face lit up, and she listened eagerly.

“It seemed to me,” Stracey went on, “that the best thing Kyra could do would be to act as companion to some lady. I’m quite aware that it is not at all pleasant work, especially if the lady happens to be an invalid; and so I’ve been very careful in choosing the right person. It would never do to have our beautiful Kyra waiting hand and foot on a hypochondriac, who would make her life a burden. But I think I have escaped that calamity.”

“I cannot afford to be particular,” said Kyra, in a low voice.

As she spoke, Mrs. Froyte came out with the coffee, and Kyra looked up at her with a pleased smile.

“Stracey has found me something to do; I am to be a companion to a lady.”

Mrs. Froyte stopped short, and the cup and saucer shook in

her hand, so that some of the coffee was spilled; but she recovered herself in a moment and giving the coffee to Stracey, went and stood beside her chair.

"I saw an advertisement in the paper," he said. "Here it is." He drank some of the coffee, set the cup down, and felt in his breast-pocket. "No; I've left it in my other coat. It was an advertisement by a lady who is going on the Continent, travelling, and wanted a young girl as a companion. I answered the advertisement, made an appointment, and went to see her."

Kyra listened breathlessly and watched him impatiently, as he took up the cup again.

"I found her to be a most charming woman, with nothing of the invalid about her; in fact, she appeared to me to be a most healthful and cheerful person. I gathered that she was very well off, and, being a widow and childless, was free to indulge her taste for travelling. She would take her own maid with her, and the companion would not be required to do anything menial; indeed, Mrs. Malcolm—that is her name—laughingly said that there would be so little for the companion to do that she might probably suffer from lack of occupation. But, of course, that was only Mrs. Malcolm's pleasant way of putting it, for one does not feel dull when one is travelling about under the most luxurious circumstances."

"It sounds almost too good to be true," said Kyra, gravely.

He glanced at her in his swift, furtive way, and then, as furtively at the other two persons who were listening as intently as Kyra; but they were looking straight before them, as if they were holding their breath in their rapt attention.

"I told Mrs. Malcolm about you and tried to describe you in terms which, to me, of course, were quite inadequate; and I showed her your photograph. She was charmed with it—how could she be otherwise?—and she was anxious that I should enter into an engagement for you, there and then, and was quite disappointed when I, of course, refused to accept the situation until I had consulted you."

"Oh, what a pity!" said Kyra. "Why did you not do so? She may have engaged someone else by this time."

"No; she promised not to do so, until I wired to her. I must give her your decision to-morrow morning, because she leaves England to-morrow evening—that is to say," he corrected himself, "she leaves the following morning; but you would have to join her to-morrow night. It is absurdly short notice—"

Without turning her head, Mrs. Froyte said:

"She could not do it."

James Froyte, as he heard the words, drew a breath of relief.

"Oh, but why not?" said Kyra, eagerly. "I can get ready quite easily by to-morrow. I have all the clothes I want: and, if I had not, I could get them in London or wherever we are going. Please, please do not hesitate. Is it too late to telegraph to-night?"

Stracey sighed.

"I was afraid that you would say it was possible," he said, regretfully. "Well, I have given my promise. If you are quite sure, I will wire to-morrow morning—that will be in plenty of time—and you and I can go up by the midday train—"

Mrs. Froyte had risen and picked up the cup and saucer. They fell from her hand with a crash.

James Froyte uttered an exclamation, and Stracey turned and looked at them with a peculiar expression in his eyes. Mrs. Froyte was as white as death and stood trembling, her eyes fixed, as if in terror.

"I must have knocked your arm," said Stracey, softly. "Don't trouble to pick up the pieces; the maid will do it. How nervous you are: you ought to take iron; there are one or two very good preparations; I must get you one. As I was saying, Kyra and I could go up by the midday train—"

"Not alone," said James Froyte and his wife, in one voice.

"Perhaps Mrs. Froyte would be so kind as to come with us," said Kyra.

Stracey leant back with languid, half-closed eyes; there was silence for a moment, then he looked up and said, as smoothly as usual:

"Certainly. You will be very pleased, will you not? You have not been quite strong enough for travelling, lately; but perhaps Mrs. Malcolm would ask you to stay the night and see them off in the morning; in fact, she seems so kind and considerate a woman that I am sure she will. Will you go with us?"

She stooped and picked up some of the larger fragments of the china, as if mechanically, then her lips formed a silent "Yes," and she went into the house; but James Froyte still leant against the wall, listening to Stracey's smooth, suave voice; and, as he listened, his lips twitched and his hands gripped each other convulsively behind his back.

CHAPTER XIX.

KYRA began her preparations that evening. Her heart was somewhat lightened of its load by the prospect of leaving the Elms, of going out into the world and earning her own living; if it were not for the thought of Lance le Breton, of her failure to fulfil her part of the contract, she could almost have been happy; and her gratitude to Stracey for having found her some employment, for permitting her to leave them, well-nigh made her forget her dislike and distrust of him.

At first she was inclined to pack only her simplest dresses; but it occurred to her that Mrs. Malcolm would probably expect her to wear evening frocks; and, in the end, she packed nearly everything she possessed. When she came to her jewellery, she hesitated over the diamond bracelet which Stracey had given her. She would have liked to return it, but she knew that he would be offended if she offered to do so, and so she put it in her case with her other things.

It was late when she got to bed; but she slept more soundly than she had done for some time past, and she woke well and in good spirits. Very little was said at breakfast about her coming departure; but she did not expect an allusion to it, for she was accustomed to the reticent manner of the Froytes. Mrs. Froyte was more silent even than usual, and did not seem hurt or surprised when, offering to assist Kyra in her packing, Kyra informed her that it was done and that she was practically quite ready to start.

After breakfast Kyra put on her hat.

"I am going up to Holmby Hall," she said. "I want to say good-bye to Lady May."

Stracey was just leaving the room; but he heard her, and paused.

"Of course," he said, pleasantly. "By the way, Kyra, I don't think I would tell her, or any one, any particulars of your engagement. I mean, the lady's name, or, in fact, anything about the business. You may not suit each other, you may not like her at first sight; and if you should not, and the affair came to nothing, you would have all the trouble and annoyance of explaining its failure. Don't you see?"

"I see," said Kyra. "I will only tell Lady May that I think I am going abroad."

"Quite so," he said, with a nod of approval.

As Kyra was going quickly along the high-road, she met Doctor Graham driving his high dog-cart; and he pulled up and raised his hat, and looked at her with kindly and professional scrutiny.

"Good-morning, Miss Jermyn!" he said. "I won't ask you how you are, for I can see for myself. You are looking in the pink of health this morning."

"I am quite well," said Kyra, looking up at him with a faint blush, her eyes shining brightly. "I am so glad I have met you; for I can say good-bye. I mean that I should have been so sorry to have gone without saying it. I am going abroad, Doctor Graham."

"Oh," he said, "that's rather sudden, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. I only knew last night."

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"I don't quite know," she replied. "I am going travelling with a lady."

"It is the best thing you could do," he said, emphatically. "I shall hear from the Froytes how you are going on. Take that medicine with you—but, mind! you are never to take more than the proper dose. Good-bye, and happiness go with you!"

He bent down and held out his hand and shook hers, nodding with pleasant encouragement. Kyra went on her way still more cheerfully, and, as she came in sight of the lodge, she saw Lady May running down the drive.

"You dear girl! You were coming to see me!" May panted.

"Yes; I have come to say good-bye," said Kyra, gently and a little wistfully.

"Good-bye!" echoed May. "Why, where are you going?—on a visit?"

"A kind of visit," replied Kyra, wishing that she could tell May everything, as she would have done but for Stracey's advice. "I am going abroad—on the Continent—with a lady. It is quite sudden, or I would have told you before. I am going to-day, by the twelve o'clock train."

"To-day!" cried May, her face downcast, her eyes full of dismay. "Oh, I am so sorry! But it's always the way! If ever I get fond of anything, it goes away or dies. There's Lance! Nobody knows how fond I was of him; and he's gone. And now there's you—and you don't know how fond I am of you, Kyra, dear—and now you're going. It is too bad. I shall miss you terribly—I've never been so fond of *anyone*—and there's no other girl-friend I care for. How

long are you going to be away? I do hope you are coming back soon."

Kyra bit her lip: she hated all this secrecy and evasion.

"I am not sure; I cannot tell," she replied. "I may be away some time or I may come back soon; but, however long I may be away, I shall not forget you, May; for I am very fond of you, and I have no one, absolutely no one, but you."

May sighed and put her arm round Kyra's waist.

"I was coming to see you this morning, dear," she said. "I've had a letter from Lance—a ship letter."

Kyra started slightly and turned her face away so that May should not see the blush that rose to it.

"It's only a short letter," said May. "And he writes as if he were awfully down in the mouth about something. I expect he hates leaving England and all of us. And— isn't it funny?—almost half the letter is about you."

Kyra could not speak.

"Yes; he wants me to write and tell him how you are and all the news about you; and he says that you and I ought to ride together a great deal; that it would be good for me, because you ride so well—he never found fault with my riding before—and I'm to teach you to fish and to persuade you to come up to the Hall as much as possible; and he says that when I see you next I am to tell you that he hasn't forgotten his dance with you and that he hopes you won't forget it. I declare"—she laughed and pressed Kyra to her—"I'm half inclined to be jealous. But it's all no use—I mean the riding and the fishing and the rest of it—now that you are going away," she added, sadly.

Kyra's heart was beating fast and she had hard work to keep her voice steady.

"It is very kind of Mr. le Breton," she said, in a tone which seemed cold because of her effort to suppress her emotion. "Will you thank him for me when you are writing to him, and tell him that I have forgotten—nothing, nothing of his kindness to me? Of course, you will tell him that I have gone abroad. And now I am afraid I must go, May, dear."

Though they were in the open road, May put her arms round Kyra's neck and kissed her with a suspicious little sound in her throat and her great girlish eyes full of tears.

"Oh, I am so sorry, so sorry!" she said. "But come back soon, Kyra! And write to me, mind! Don't go away and forget me, like an ordinary girl. But you won't do that; you are not like other girls. I know that, somehow, though I've

only known you for a little while. But I've known you long enough to love you, Kyra, dear; and I feel as badly as when dear old Lance went."

Kyra drew the girl's head to her bosom and kissed her lovingly, and in a voice that faltered, whispered:

"Don't be afraid that I shall forget you, May. The love is not all on one side, believe me. You came to me when I was alone, and—and wanted a friend. And I am grateful to you and as sorry to part with you as you are to part with me. Let me go now, dear— Ah, don't cry, May! Good-bye!"

The tears were in her own eyes as, at last, she tore herself away; and it was some minutes before she was able to look back, with a smile, and wave her handkerchief to May, who stood by the lodge gate openly mopping her eyes.

The lunch was on the table and Mrs. Froyte was already dressed for the journey, though there was plenty of time. The woman appeared to be in a state of nervous excitement, though she endeavored to conceal it under a stolid and apathetic manner. Kyra ran up and finished her packing and her boxes were brought down to the hall. She would have refused any luncheon; but Mrs. Froyte insisted upon her eating something.

"You have a long journey before you; you are excited now; you may not be able to get anything to eat for some time," she said.

"Quite right," said Stracey. "But like Kyra, I do not feel very hungry. I'll take a biscuit and a soda-and-whiskey. You'd better put something in your bag," he added to Mrs. Froyte.

Presently the fly drove up and Kyra went about saying good-bye. She gave a little present to each of the servants and shook hands with them; then turning to James Froyte, who had been hovering about all the morning, in a nervous, purposeless way.

"Good-bye, Mr. Froyte," she said, in a low voice. "I want to thank you for all your kindness to me. Greater kindness than I was aware of, than I understood, until—until the other night; but I do not know how to thank you enough. I will write and tell you how I get on, how I like my—situation."

She laughed softly, but James Froyte winced and his pale face went red in blotches.

"Yes; write—write to me soon," he said, huskily.

"As soon as she can," said Stracey, suavely, and with a smile. "We must not expect to hear from her too quickly; she will, no doubt, have a great deal to do. And it is never

very easy to write when one is travelling. Now, mother, are you ready? Come, Kyra."

He turned to his father, as he helped the two ladies into the fly, and said:

"I may not be back for a day or two; but I am not certain."

James Froyte nodded; but his eyes were fixed on Kyra with a strange expression, and he stepped forward hastily with his lips open, as if he were about to say something; but the fly drove off at the moment, and Kyra, as she looked from the window, saw him standing at the door, clasping and unclasping his hands with a nervous and irresolute gesture. Something in the expression of the man's face made her uncomfortable and vaguely haunted her for some time. She looked back at the house and the surrounding scenery, but with none of the pangs which usually accompany the parting with the inanimate things we love. She had never been happy there; in her heart, she was glad to leave it. But as they passed the Holmby lodge, there stood May, red-eyed and waving her handkerchief; and as Kyra waved hers, a hot flush of remembrance rose to her face. For the sight of May and of the old Hall recalled the night of the ball and all that had happened to herself and Lance le Breton. It all seemed a dream: but what a dream!

"Your little friend, Lady May, seems sorry to lose you," said Stracey, blandly.

"Yes," Kyra said, simply.

They were in good time for the train, and Stracey was most attentive to the two ladies, and got them corner-seats in a first-class carriage, tipping the porter liberally and chatting in his pleasantest way to the station-master. He was as attentive during the whole of the journey to town, getting papers and magazines at one of the principal stations, arranging the blinds, and displaying the greatest anxiety for Kyra's comfort especially. But for some part of the way he travelled in a smoking-carriage, which happened to be empty, and there his expression and manner changed. The smile left his face, and he sat in the corner smoking continuously and almost savagely; his eyes glancing from side to side furtively, his brows knit, and his thin lip twitching, as if he were engaged in some undertaking which required the greatest care and circumspection.

The two women were almost silent; for, though Kyra was willing to talk, Mrs. Froyte did not appear to be inclined to do so, but leant back and either stared vacantly through the

window or at the floor. Kyra tried to read; but it was a failure: her mind was too full of Lance le Breton, of her strange marriage, of imaginings respecting her future life. It was dusk when they reached London, and Stracey came to the carriage.

"We have to go to another terminus," he said. "Mrs. Malcolm's place is a little out of town. If you'll wait here a minute or two, I'll get a cab."

He got a four-wheeler, the luggage was put on the top, and they drove through the crowded streets to another station. As they alighted he glanced at his watch.

"I'm afraid we've lost one train," he said. "Yes, we have! Never mind. There'll be another before very long. Suppose you go into the waiting-room, while I see to the luggage."

He took them into the waiting-room and went off. Presently he came back and loitered about; and after a minute or two said to Kyra, who was standing by the door, watching, with interest, the bustle and excitement of the great station.

"Wouldn't you like to look at the book-stall?"

Kyra assented and they sauntered to the book-stall, and Stracey bought a novel and a magazine or two. Then suddenly he said:

"By Jove! I fancy this is our train!"

He made an enquiry of a porter, then came back to Kyra.

"Yes, it is; if you'll get in, I'll bring my mother."

He put her in a first-class compartment and hurried back to the waiting-room, where Mrs. Froyte was sitting with compressed lips and moody eyes.

"Singular coincidence!" he said. "I've just met Mrs. Malcolm on the platform. She is going down by this train. I'll bring her to you. No! perhaps you'd better come. No! on second thoughts, I'll bring her to you—though I'm not quite sure how soon the train starts."

He had all the manner of a man whose train is about to go, and who does not know quite what to do; and Mrs. Froyte rose in a kind of nervous flurry.

"I haven't had time to ask her whether she can put you up," said Stracey. "Perhaps I'd better do so. If, by any chance, she can't, and I can't get back—there is so little time, I really don't know what to do or say—I must go and look after them. If I don't come back, you'll know she can't put you up."

Mrs. Froyte rose, sank down, then rose again.

"I want to go, Stracey. I will not leave Kyra. I must see this woman!"

"Of course, of course!" he said. "There's plenty of time—at least, I think so. I must go and see to the luggage. You'd better go on to the platform and see Kyra and Mrs. Malcolm. It's Number Three. No, no, no; it's not this door, but the other one."

He hurried her through the opposite door; then he left the waiting-room quickly, and running along the platform, got into the carriage in which Kyra was seated, just as the train started.

"Where is Mrs. Froyte?" asked Kyra, but with no suspicion or alarm.

Stracey laughed.

"What a narrow squeak!" he said. "I just had time to put her in a carriage at the end of the train. I will bring her in here at the first stoppage. Dear me, I had no idea that the train was starting so soon! That idiot of a porter told me the wrong time."

CHAPTER XX.

"How annoying!" said Kyra. "I hope Mrs. Froyte will not be upset; she is so nervous and so easily alarmed."

"She is all right," responded Stracey. "She was laughing over the confusion. Won't you come into this corner; will you not take off your hat and lean back? I am afraid you will be terribly tired with this long journey."

Kyra took off her hat, because it seemed ungracious not to comply with his suggestion; and, as he had expected, she fell asleep. She was awakened by the motion of the train; it was going at a great rate, and was evidently an express.

"Where is Mrs. Froyte?" she asked, passing her hand over her eyes and smoothing her hair.

Stracey looked up from the magazine which he was reading by the lamp-light and smiled easily.

"As you were asleep when we reached the junction, I did not like to disturb you by bringing her in. I will do so at the next station. Do you feel all the better for your sleep?"

Kyra replied in the affirmative and looked through the window into the semi-darkness. She felt the patter of rain upon the pane; the wind was blowing in gusts; the weather had suddenly changed.

"It is a bad night," said Stracey. "I hope you are well wrapped up, for I fancy we shall have some little distance to go from the station."

"I have my cloak," said Kyra. "But I do not know

about Mrs. Froyte; however, she can have mine; I shall be quite warm enough."

When the train stopped at the next station, Stracey left the carriage, closing the door behind him, and did not return until the train was on the point of starting.

"Most awkward mistake has occurred," he said, with an air of annoyance. "My mother is not in the train."

"Not in the train!" exclaimed Kyra, with surprise. "Why, what has happened to her?"

"Oh, nothing has happened," he answered, with a reassuring laugh. "She got out at the junction, and, somehow or other, let the train start without her. She may have thought that we had got out, that we were going to change there, and she probably lost the train while she was looking for us on the platform or in the waiting-room."

"Oh, poor Mrs. Froyte!" said Kyra. "What shall we do? Can we not go back for her?"

"I thought of that, of course," said Stracey, with a thoughtful air; "but that wouldn't do; for we might miss her. She is pretty nearly sure—in fact, quite sure—to come on by the next train. There is one about an hour after this; and I will leave word at the station—in fact, leave a fly for her—so that she may follow us. It is very awkward and annoying, but there is no cause for alarm."

The assertion seemed unnecessary to Kyra.

"I am only thinking of Mrs. Froyte. She will be so nervous and so tired. Have we much farther to go? I had an idea that Mrs. Malcolm lived only a short way from town."

"So had I," said Stracey; "but distances are only relative, after all. We've only another station or two, I think."

Kyra leant back with a sigh. Two stations were passed, then Stracey jumped up and began to get the things together.

"This is ours," he said. "Wait until I see whether the fly is here. It is raining very hard; a beast of a night."

Kyra stood by the door, looking out at the station. As Stracey had said, it was a beast of a night, and the few other passengers were hurrying along the wet platform of the small and insignificant station. It was badly lit, and there appeared to be only one porter and no luggage besides their own.

Stracey came back after a minute or two; and Kyra saw, as the light from the carriage-lamp fell upon his face, that he looked pale and anxious, though he smiled as he said:

"Come along as quickly as you can. The fly is here. I have made all arrangements for my mother to follow."

He took her arm and hurried her from the train across the

platform to an old and rickety fly which had been drawn up close to the station door. In doing so, he held an umbrella over her so that her face was concealed from the porter. The fly smelt musty, as if it had not been used for a year; and it rocked and jolted over a rough and badly made road. The rain came down in torrents; at times it seemed to Kyra as if the wind would overturn the ramshackle vehicle. She tried to see something of the scenery, but the night was dark and she could see nothing, not even the lights of any houses.

She was very tired, but she tried to remain cheerful, and even laughed as the jolting fly threatened to shake her hat off. The drive seemed an interminable one; but the rattling of the windows rendered any question she might have wished to put to Stracey quite impossible. At last the vehicle made a sudden curve, apparently got on to a smoother road, and suddenly pulled up.

Stracey opened the door with difficulty and jumped out.

"Here we are," he said, with a laugh which, if she had not been so tired, Kyra would have recognised as a false one. "Really, if we had gone much farther, I don't think there would have been much left of us."

Kyra looked up and round about her as he helped her out, and saw, by the dim light of a lamp which a woman on the steps was holding up, the front of a grim, neglected-looking house. There appeared to be a light in only two windows; the whole place was gaunt and forbidding. A dog wailed and whined from somewhere at the back; and the wind moaned through some funeral elms which overshadowed the gloomy building. A feeling of disappointment, almost of dismay, struck home to Kyra; but she had no time or opportunity to utter a word, for Stracey took her arm and led her up the steps, which, even at that moment, she saw were moss-grown and broken in places. They entered the hall, and the door closed behind them.

"Good-evening, sir; good-evening, miss," said the woman, setting the lamp down on a bracket. "It's turned out a terrible night."

"Yes," said Stracey. "Is Mrs. Malcolm here?"

He put the question in a mechanical way, with a peculiar glance at the woman, who replied suavely and with a responsive glance:

"Yes, sir. Miss Jermyn would like to go upstairs to her room, at once, no doubt."

Kyra looked round the hall or passage. It had been newly painted and papered, and there were one or two articles of

furniture, but it looked bare and as if it had only recently been inhabited. As she followed the woman upstairs, she heard the flyman deposit the boxes in the hall, the door close after him, and the fly drive away. The landing was as bare as the hall; the woman opened the door of a room which had also been newly painted and papered, but had a close, musty smell, which seemed to pervade the whole house, or as much as Kyra had seen of it. The room was plainly but not uncomfortably furnished, but Kyra was surprised at the absence of anything like luxury, such as she would have expected in the house of a rich person.

"I brought you some hot water," said the woman; "and I'll help bring up one of your boxes at once; for no doubt you would like to have it."

Kyra, as she thanked her, looked at her with natural curiosity, and saw that she was a middle-aged woman with a face that indicated an unusual amount of firmness and resolution; but, though it was rather a hard face, it was not an unkind one. Kyra heard her box placed outside the door, then the woman dragged it in.

"I'll bring up the other one presently," she said. "Can I help you in any way? I shall hear you when you come down."

She looked with a calm kind of scrutiny at the girl's pale and beautiful face, then lowered her eyes and left the room. Kyra sat on the bed for a minute or two, endeavouring to master her disappointment and surprise. It was all so different to what she had expected. She had pictured a luxuriously appointed house in the suburbs: well lit and with several servants; but it seemed to her that she had recognised Stracey's footsteps descending the stairs after her box had been put at her door, and she had a suspicion that the woman who had received them was the only servant. However, she would soon learn more of the situation.

She removed her hat and jacket, and, after a good wash, felt a little more cheerful; and, having arranged her hair, she opened the door and went down-stairs. The woman, who appeared to have been waiting for her in the hall, came forward with a nod and a little smile, and, opening a door, showed her into what looked like a dining-room. It was a gloomy-looking apartment, sparsely furnished and badly lit by a paraffin lamp. The table was laid for supper, and Stracey stood by the fire-place, in which a fire, newly lit, was smouldering in a damp and cheerless fashion. Kyra looked round expectantly; but Stracey was alone—there was no other lady but herself in the room.

"Another disappointment," he said, as he came forward, with a smile, and set a chair at the table for her. "Mrs. Malcolm has a very bad headache, and has been obliged to go and lie down. She sent to say how sorry she is and that she will try to get up to receive you; but I knew that you would not wish her to do so; and I begged her, in your name, on no account to get up. The supper will be ready in a moment or two: you must be wanting it very badly."

Kyra sat down and looked about her and remained silent, while the woman put some cold meat and other things on the table, and, after pausing to see if they asked for anything, left the room. Kyra waited until the door had closed, then she said:

"I am sorry Mrs. Malcolm is ill. What a strange place, Stracey!"

"Isn't it?" he said, with a shrug of his shoulders. "It appears that Mrs. Malcolm had given up her London house and that she came to this place, which belongs to her, for the week or two between leaving her house in town and starting on her travels."

Kyra could not suppress a shudder as she listened to the wind and the rain, the rattling of the windows and the moaning of the elms outside; but far worse than all these noises was the eerie silence which seemed to brood over the grim place.

"Are there no other servants but this woman?" she asked, as she tried to eat the slice of cold meat which Stracey had passed her.

"No," he said; "they have all been discharged, excepting the lady's-maid, who is in London, and will join you to-morrow. This is the housekeeper. Her name is Lambert: an old and faithful servant, I take it, from what she says. Not a very cheerful place or reception, Kyra," he added; "and I am afraid you feel depressed and disappointed; but you must remember that it is only for one night and must keep up your spirits. I, myself, feel rather down in the mouth; but I should be under any circumstances; for it is hard to part with you, Kyra."

He appeared to have as little appetite as Kyra, though he made a great pretence and fuss of eating; and presently he rose and went to the sideboard; but as he opened the door of the cellarette, he stopped as if he had recollected himself.

"I declare," he said, with an uneasy laugh and a flush; "I was going to see if there was any wine, going to help myself. Bad manners that!"

He rang the bell and came back to the table, and when Mrs. Lambert entered, asked for some wine. She brought out a decanter and he filled Kyra's glass, but she shook her head; and presently she laid down her knife and fork and sat listening.

"Is it not time Mrs. Froyte should be here?" she asked.

He started slightly and looked at her as if he had forgotten; then he took out his watch and seemed to calculate.

"Do you know, I am afraid she won't come," he said. "Having missed us at the junction, she must have gone back home; and, really, considering all things, it was the best thing she could have done."

Kyra went a little paler and she sighed.

"I am sorry," she said in a low voice. "I should have liked her to have been with me to-night, especially as Mrs. Malcolm is not well enough to see me. Are you sure she has gone back? She may be waiting at the station."

He rose and poured himself out some wine into a tumbler and looked at her under his half-shut lids, with a strange expression on his sinister face.

"I don't think there is any cause for uneasiness," he said; "but if it will make you any more satisfied, I will go to the station and enquire. I have no doubt I can wire along the line, though, of course, it is too late to send a telegram in the ordinary way."

"I shall be very glad, if you would," said Kyra; "for I do feel uneasy about her, and I should like to know what has become of her."

"Very well," he assented, almost with an air of relief as it seemed to Kyra. "I will go. It is on the cards that I may meet the fly bringing her. By the way, if I do not get satisfactory news, you will not mind if I follow her up, if I do not return here to-night?"

"Oh, no," said Kyra. "Why should I? I am most anxious about her. She is so nervous, she is not fit to be travelling alone, and I am quite sure that she will be frightened and upset at having missed us."

He went into the passage and Kyra fancied that she heard him talking in a whisper to Mrs. Lambert. Presently he returned with his overcoat on and his hat in his hand.

"I am off," he said. "If I do not return to-night, you will give my kind regards to Mrs. Malcolm and make my excuses. I shall meet you at Charing Cross to-morrow."

"But do you know the time we shall start?" asked Kyra, *with some surprise.*

He looked confused for a moment.

"Oh, she will be sure to telegraph to me," he said. "I wish I were leaving you under more cheerful circumstances, Kyra. Say the word, and I will remain."

"No, no," she said. "Pray go and find out what has become of Mrs. Froyte."

He held out his hand.

"Good-bye—no, I will not say good-bye, but good-night."

She gave him her hand and almost recoiled as she did so, for his was as cold as ice. He smiled at her with a smile which she had always disliked, which had always aroused a vague fear and mistrust in her bosom, then he went out. She heard the door close behind him, a key turned in the lock, and bolts shot into their sockets. She went and stood beside the fire, looking into the cheerless blaze, and listening for some sound in the gaunt house. She was too tired to think of herself, almost too tired to be anxious on Mrs. Froyte's account. It seemed to her that the whole thing was a kind of nightmare, from which she would awake presently, cold and shuddering. Presently the door opened and the woman of the house came in and began to clear the supper things away. When she had finished, she said, respectfully enough, but with a kind of self-contained calmness, which sits ill upon a servant:

"Wouldn't you like to go to bed, miss? You look fagged and tired. It's been a long journey for you."

"Thank you, I think I will go to bed," said Kyra.

The woman took the lamp from its bracket on the wall and preceded Kyra up the stairs.

"I've lit a fire for you," she said; "it will be more comfortable. I hope you'll ask for anything you want. We're a long way from the shops, and it often isn't easy to get anyone to send; but I'll manage to get anything you want, anything in reason."

Kyra looked at her in blank amazement. How could she want anything between now and to-morrow morning, when she and Mrs. Malcolm would start for the Continent?

"Thank you very much," she said; "but I don't understand."

The woman looked confused for a moment, then went and turned down the bed and Kyra walked to the window and drew aside the curtains and the blind.

"Is it raining still?" she asked. "We shall have a bad passage to-morrow if the wind—"

She broke off suddenly, for, to her amazement, she saw

that the window was heavily barred. She turned to the woman with a faint exclamation.

"Why are these great bars at the window?" she asked.

"Bars?" echoed the woman, without turning her head. "Are there bars? Oh, yes; this used to be the nursery. They were put there to keep the children from falling out."

Kyra smiled.

"It makes one think of a prison," she said, as she began to take off her collar. "Have you seen Mrs. Malcolm since we arrived? Is she better?"

"Oh, yes, she is better," replied the woman.

"I wonder—I wonder whether she would like me to see her," said Kyra, pausing as she unhooked her blouse. "I should like very much to see her, if only for a moment or two."

The woman went softly between Kyra and the door and regarded her with a curious mixture of pity and firmness.

"Now, don't you worry about Mrs. Malcolm, miss," she said, soothingly. "You'll see her all in good time. What you've got to do to-night, is to go to bed and get a good sleep and wake up bright and cheerful in the morning. I daresay you are upset by the journey and the strangeness of it all; but there's no cause for you to feel any alarm, or to be nervous in any way. Your good guardian has left you in my charge, and, though I say it, he couldn't have left you in a better. I shall take as much care of you as if you were my own flesh and blood."

Kyra stood as if she were turned to stone and regarded the woman in amazement, mingled with a vague dread. Why did she say this to her, in such a tone, with such a strange expression on her face?

"I don't understand you; I don't know what you mean," she said in a voice which she tried to keep steady. "My guardian—do you mean Mr. Stracey Froyte?—has not left me to your care. I am engaged as companion to your mistress, to Mrs. Malcolm—I want to see her—I—I— Why do you look like that?" she broke off, for the woman was regarding her with the same strange mixture of pity and decision. Kyra's vague fear grew to actual dread. With a cry, she sprang towards the door, and, crying: "Stracey! Mrs. Froyte!" ran down the stairs to the front door. It was locked, as she knew, but the key had been removed; and as her trembling hands flew from the lock to the bolts, the woman came behind her and took hold of her firmly, but not *angently, by the arms.*

"Now, now, my dear!" she said, remonstratingly. "Do be quiet! I tell you there is nothing to be afraid of. Come upstairs to bed and get a good night's rest."

Kyra turned upon her half-angrily, half-piteously.

"Let me see Mrs. Malcolm," she implored. "Let me see her or let me go. I am frightened, you terrify me—this place—the house—"

The woman drew her from the door.

"Come, come," she said, soothingly. "Be reasonable. There's no Mrs. Malcolm here; it's only that troublesome fancy of yours. You'll get rid of it after you've been here quietly for a few days. Poor young lady!"

Kyra's arms dropped to her side and she ceased to struggle, and she turned her white face and distended eyes with a terrible question in them.

"Why do you speak to me like this?" she asked. "Do you think that I—am mad?"

"No, no, not mad," returned the woman in a persuasive voice. "Of course, you're not mad; but your mind has gone a little astray; you've got wrong ideas about things. But there, we won't talk about it; you'll soon get better. Come up to bed, there's a good young lady."

CHAPTER XXI.

"THE Girl I Left Behind Me," is a sentiment and a tune upon which Tommy Atkins is reared: Lance le Breton sang it in his heart as the vessel left its moorings and started with him for West Africa; it was the girl he left behind him of whom he thought as he gazed at the white cliffs of Albion which he might not see again for years, perhaps never. He had not realised how deeply and how passionately he loved Kyra until the moment of his parting from her in the humble, little coffee-house near the church; and the realisation grew upon him and became intensified with every hour, every mile, that took him farther from her. He could think of nothing but her, not even of the future, of the possibilities of a career, which he had one time, before he met her, regarded with the hopefulness and sanguinity which belong to men of his years and character.

It seemed to him that there was no one else in the world but Kyra, that in fact, she was his world; and he was so absorbed in his love and in the misery of parting with her, in the dull aching of his heart which only ceased at night when he was

asleep and not dreaming of her, that he did not make a very joyous companion for his fellow-officers and passengers. He would have moped and brooded, if there had been time; but there was plenty to do; the regiment was short-handed and the men needed a great deal of looking after; and Lance did it all with a kind of grim intensity, as if he were trying to forget himself in his work: as was exactly the case.

There were two or three pretty women on board, and, of course, they were pleasant to him; for, as has been hinted, he was good to look upon and an altogether extremely agreeable young man; but all their efforts to attract his attention were in vain. He was, as the song says, "Polite and nothing more;" and, as one of the young ladies complained in the privacy of her state-room to another young lady, he might have been a block of wood, or worse still, a piece of stone, for all the impression their charms and blandishments could make upon him: but, of course, they tried all the harder.

Lance got on better with his fellow-officers, who took to him exceedingly; though he was apt to go off into a fit of abstraction while you were talking to him, and perhaps, even, of getting up and walking away, as if the conversation were ended, instead of having only just begun or being in the middle. The men also liked him, for, though he was a bit of a martinet, he was good-natured and considerate. He was down upon them like a cart-load of bricks for any neglect of duty or wanton mischief; but he would sit beside them when they were sick, and looked after their small comfort, and would even write a letter for them or give some advice in the matter of some difficulty with "the girls they had left behind them." Both officers and men had been quick to observe that Lance, for all his taciturnity and abstraction, was every inch a man, and a man who could be relied upon.

The brigade was bound for a certain Protectorate on the Gold Coast, where, of course, a "little war" was in progress: there is always a little war in progress in connection with every Protectorate. It is considered as regular a thing as the measles or the whooping cough.

Fortunately for the gentle reader, there is no need to explain the causes of the trouble; indeed, it is a question whether anyone understood them, excepting, perhaps, a permanent official or two at the Colonial Office.

All the general public, including Lance, knew was, that the Ashantees on the other side of the border had been "carrying on" lately; had, like some first-class nation, been tearing up *treaties* and playing the Old Harry generally. There had

been orgies of human sacrifices amongst themselves, and, what was of more consequence, raids across the border and attacks upon British settlers, whom they had killed with the cheerful irresponsibility which is characteristic of the happy and light-hearted savage.

It was these gentry whom Lance, with the rest of the expedition, was going to punish. He didn't know it until he got there, but it was a tougher job than the home authorities were aware; for some low or other the home authorities can never be got to realise that any kind of little war is likely to prove a tough one, until we have met with a reverse or two and have lost a certain number of men; then the aforesaid authorities express a fine mixture of surprise and indignation, and, waking up to the situation, take the affair seriously in hand.

The brigade plunged into the thick of it almost as soon as it landed; and Lance speedily discovered that soldiering was not all scarlet tunic and pipe-clay, but also comprised a quantity of hard and not altogether pleasant work, done more or less effectually on an empty stomach and in wet under-clothing.

"What I object to," said Bertie Gordon, the young lieutenant who acted as Lance's subaltern and who shared what the War Office, with unconscious irony, calls a tent—"what I object to, if I am asked—"

"Which you are not," remarked Lance, who, like Bertie, was engaged in wringing the water from his tunic.

"I know," said the incorrigible Bertie; "but I thought, perhaps, you would like to know my opinion. What I object to is the superfluity of marching in a continual downpour and the absence of any fighting. Now, when I joined this blessed brigade, I was given to understand that we meant business, that there was going to be any amount of scrim: that's why I came. But, up to the present, we appear to have been engaged in a kind of hide-and-seek, in which the niggers play the part of hide. I hope they enjoy it. I can't say I do." He lifted the flap of the tent and looked out at the general murkiness, at the sentry pacing to and fro, a dim object in the pitiless, pouring rain. At a little distance some of the men were endeavouring to make a fire under an improvised shelter of boughs: language as sulphurous as the smoke, and almost as thick, floated towards him. "Was it for this I left a fond mother and the shelter of a comfortable, not to say luxurious home? Was it for this—"

"Shut up!" said Lance, with a laugh, for he knew that the

lad's grumbling was only a bit of affectation and that he was really enjoying himself, as your English boy will when there is a prospect of fighting, however remote. "I'll go and see if Spilkins has got some hot water. What you want, Bertie, is a cup of strong coffee."

"Pardon," retorted Bertie, blandly. "What I want is a six-course dinner, with 1893 Wachter and green Chartreuse and a Böck to wind up with; instead of which there'll be tinned mutton—sainted aunt! how I hate tinned mutton! If it was only beef or rabbit or anything else; but mutton!—and hot mud and water which the commissariat humourously calls coffee: I think humour is out of place in a commissariat. No, don't you go; I'll get it. You've been doing nearly all the work to-day, as usual."

"Here, throw this over you, then," said Lance, pitching him a waterproof.

When the lad had gone, Lance took up Bertie's tunic and wrung it as dry as he could and hunted up a pair of comparatively dry socks for him. He had got fond of the bright, light-hearted lad who had left a life of ease and luxury and joined the brigade on the chance of getting some fun—as he called marching through tropical forests in tropical rain, on poor and insufficient food, lying in pools of water instead of on a spring-mattress, and running the risk of being perforated by an Ashantee's spear or shot by a rifle—made in Birmingham; and Bertie had grown more than fond of Lance, whom he regarded with an affection tempered by admiration and something like awe. He admired Lance's splendid strength, absolute ignorance of fear, and apparent incapacity for fatigue; and he indulged in an affectation of grumbling, because no word of complaint ever escaped Lance le Breton's lips.

Often Bertie wondered why Lance had joined the brigade. If it was for the fun of fighting the niggers, Lance took the idea of fun grimly, for he never got excited at the prospect of a scrim, never expressed the overwhelming desire, experienced by the rest, of meeting the foe; but went on his way with a kind of grim, steady persistency, which made light of forced marches in the pitiless rain and disregarded the shortcomings of the commissariat and the annoying tactics of the enemy. That there was something on Lance's mind, that there was some secret trouble which at times possessed him so completely that he seemed well-nigh unconscious of all that was going on about him—though he woke up pretty sharply if anything went wrong—Bertie guessed; but he could not guess if it were a love or monetary trouble, and Lance, who had grown

strangely reserved since that morning's work at Benstead, never gave the slightest clue.

Bertie came back presently with Spilkins and a kettle of more-or-less boiling water, for which Spilkins apologised in characteristic fashion.

"It's rainin' so bloomin' 'ard, sir, that a patent fire-extinguisher ain't nothin' to it. I'm afraid 'e ain't 'alf boilin' now; but it's 'ot, any'ow."

"That's all right, Spilkins," said Lance. "Have you got some for yourself? Here, take some of this coffee; and there's half a tin of marmalade. Catch. Never mind Mr. Gordon's and my clothes; we'll see about them. Look after your own; and get under shelter as soon as you can; we shall be on the march early to-morrow morning. Are those boots of yours easier?"

"Yes, thank you, sir," replied Spilkins, saluting; but looking at the clothes wistfully, as he went out. It didn't matter to him that his own things were wet but it 'urt him, as he would have said, that Lance, to say nothing of Mr. Gordon—but it was of Lance he thought—should not lie dry and comfortable.

Lance and Bertie made their coffee and sat munching the apology for a supper: tinned mutton, marmalade, chocolate, and an army biscuit. Pretty soon, if things did not mend with the commissariat, it would probably be army biscuit alone. While they were at it, the flap of the tent was lifted and the colonel came in. He was a grey-haired man with a deeply lined face; a man who had seen many wars, but had been unlucky: hence his participation in this one.

"Don't disturb yourselves," he said, as Lance and Bertie rose. "What is it, coffee? Thanks."

He took the tin mug and blew the liquid, though it really did not need it, because he was in a hurry.

"We shall have to march in a couple of hours, Le Breton," he said. "Our scouts have sighted them a matter of ten miles off. We might get near them in the darkness. I hope to Heaven we shall: this is a poor game."

"Just what I was saying, sir," said the incorrigible Bertie, cheerfully.

"Oh, you were, were you?" said the colonel, grimly but pleasantly. "Well, you're not far wrong. But I think we shall have some fun presently. Keep the men well in hand and don't let them break until you get the word. I want to get on to the beggars at close quarters. No mutton, thanks; I've had a biscuit."

"The old man's a good sort," remarked Bertie, when the colonel had gone.

"He is," said Lance. "I wonder when you will be able to keep your mouth shut."

"When there's nothing to put in it," replied the irrepressible. "But it's good news the old man brought; I'm simply spoiling for a fight. Only ten miles!"

"Which you'll never get through, if you don't get some rest," said Lance. "Here, lie down and go to sleep, like a good child."

He tossed some blankets into a corner and Bertie coiled himself up, and Lance followed suit; but before Bertie went well off, he opened his eyes once or twice and saw that his senior was staring at the top of the tent and wide awake.

Lance was thinking.

He was thinking of the dusky, old church, of the old clergyman's droning voice, half-drowned by the thunder-storm, of the girl's pale, beautiful face, of a soft, little hand quivering in his. He had the wedding-ring tied to a ribbon, nestling against his heart; her marriage-certificate, wrapped in an oil-skin, was in the inner breast-pocket of his shirt. Suppose he were to be killed, which was quite on the cards, who would know of their marriage, what would happen? He tried to thrust the question from him, just as he tried to thrust away the vision of that beautiful face, the sound of that sweet, clear voice; but he only fell asleep an hour before Spilkins crept cautiously in with the colonel's order to march.

They started in the dark and hurried forward, the men stumbling and swearing under their breath, but all possessed by a feverish eagerness and the joy of anticipation; for they all knew there was a prospect of at last coming up and closing with the slippery foe who had harassed yet evaded them for weeks past; and the thirst for battle raged in the breast of every man; for all of them had lost comrades, more or less dear, and revenge is sweet; though to Tommy Atkins's credit be it said, once he has got his revenge, he is as gentle as a sucking lamb and as mild as a Bordeaux pigeon.

Lance marched beside his men, thinking still of Kyra; but presently, all in a moment, he ceased to think even of her, for an order ran down the rank, the men crouched and laid low, with rifles thrust forward and eyes all aglow. Something was moving in the bush immediately ahead of him; a wisp of smoke was curling faintly and whitely through the darkness: it was the enemy's camp-fire.

"We are close upon them," whispered Bertie, in impish glee, as his hand gripped his sword.

"Shut up!" growled Lance. "Keep those men quiet. Tell that fellow to lie down."

They lay in silence, as motionless as the camels of a caravan when the sirocco is passing over them; lay for what seemed an age to them, until their joints were cracking, their veins bursting; then, suddenly, the electric whisper came:

"Fire!" and a volley belched from the rifles, followed by shouts and yells from the foe, who fired in return, but widely and at random.

Bertie had sprung to his feet; but Lance, cool as a cucumber, had sworn at him, and the lad had gone down again. As he crouched, he picked up a bullet, which, by the way, would have hit him if he had remained standing.

"Whew! It's a Martini-Henry," he said. "Where have they got them from, I wonder?"

Lance shrugged his shoulders. Where indeed? Where, when the heathen do rage furiously, do they get the latest rifles and the most approved ammunition? Not even the War Office, apparently, can tell.

The order came again. "Fire!" Then came the more welcome word, "Charge!"

Up sprang every man as if a volcano had burst under his feet, and on the small band rushed, as if they had been shot from a catapult. Bertie yelled in his joy; for it was a scrim, a hand-to-hand fight, at last. In the murky darkness, in the heavy atmosphere, rendered more murky and heavy by the fumes of the camp-fire and the odour of gunpowder, to the accompaniment of hoarse shouts, of fluent oaths, of the shrieks and screams of the wounded, the battle raged. It was impossible to tell in the confusion which side was gaining, or if either was. Only two men seemed cool and in possession of their sober senses. One was the grey-haired, much be-wrinkled colonel, who sat his horse with the sweet calmness of a man waiting at the covert side; the other was Lance le Breton, who led his men, sword in hand, as if he were playing in a football match. Bertie glanced at him, and for a moment affection gave place to admiration; for he himself was all a-tremble with excitement and half blind with the frenzy of battle.

It was a hand-to-hand fight now, and, as has often been the case, the Englishman had, in his dusky foe, met an enemy worthy of his steel. It was a matter of bayonet and sword.

against sword and spear and bayonet. A huge savage would spring from the broken ranks, choose his foe, and grapple with him until one or both fell to the blood-stained earth. The ranks were broken; black man and white were mingled in confusion. Lance, glancing keenly round him, as he had often glanced in the thick and crisis of a football match, saw Bertie leap forward, and, at the same moment, two of the Ashantee spring to meet him. The boy stumbled as he sprang; the two gigantic blacks swooped down upon him. Lance, pushing a couple of his own men aside, literally leapt toward the lad, and, as one of the Ashantee raised his spear to bury it in Bertie's heart, Lance, with one stroke, struck up the spear, and, with another, cut the man down. But it would still have gone badly with Bertie; for the other Ashantee levelled a revolver—where did he get it? oh, answer, ye men of Birmingham! where did he get it?—and Bertie would never have returned to that fond mother or that comfortable home which he had jestingly regretted, if Lance had not interposed his own body and cut the foe down; but not before he had felt a sting, like that of a gigantic bee, in the fleshy part of his arm.

Bertie, staggering and half-blinded by the smoke, laid one hand on Lance's arm.

"Saved me, by Jingo!" he said, pantingly.

"Keep your head, you young fool!" returned Lance.

"This isn't a cricket match."

They were separated a moment afterwards; for the fun—ah, what fun for the mothers and wives and sisters in England, the loving womenkind who would, all of a-tremble, read the report of that battle, and in anguished anxiety scan the casualty list—waxed furious. It lasted for little better than an hour; then, with a kind of dull surprise, the small British force discovered that they were fighting nothing. The foe had given way; its dead and wounded lay upon the ground; the battle was ours. The colonel's voice, harsh and grim enough at such moments, though it was gentle, almost languid, at others, called "Cease firing!" and the victors, panting and breathless, gathered together in something like order and looked into each other's eyes, with a soundless laugh on their lips, a wild, hysteric joy in their eyes. For they had tasted battle and their souls were assuaged.

They camped on the spot—on the spot of victory. Their own wounded and their foe's were in the charge of the doctors. Tents were pitched. Lance and Bertie found themselves, as if by no volition of their own, lying side by side and

looking at each other. Suddenly Bertie made a gesture—a gesture of appeal, of gratitude.

“By George, Le Breton!” he said, as if with penitence and remorse, “look at your arm! It’s bleeding badly. You got that saving me; yes, you did. I know. I’d got my senses about me. I saw you step in front of me; you saved me from those fellows; you saved my life.”

“Don’t talk rot!” said Lance. “You don’t know anything about it; you’d lost your head.”

“Oh, no, I hadn’t,” said Bertie. “You saved me, right enough. It was a plucky thing to do; though, of course, it’s nothing to you; you are always doing plucky things. The men call you ‘Never Fear,’ and they’re right.”

“Rot!” remarked Lance.

“No, it isn’t,” retorted Bertie. “Let me call the doctor to look at that arm of yours.”

“It’s nothing,” said Lance, impatiently. “It’s a mere flesh-wound; the bullet’s not in it. I can tie it up with a handkerchief. Well, we’ve beaten them, Bertie. All we’ve got to do now is to march on Kumassy; the rest is for diplomacy.”

“Yes; that’s the worst of it,” said Bertie, with a sigh. “I wish you’d let the doctor look at that arm,” he broke off.

Lance good-humouredly blessed the doctor.

“He’s plenty of real work to do; with the niggers, as well as ours. Yes; it’s a matter of diplomacy.”

Bertie sighed.

“You remind me of what a man I knew used to say; he used to say that if diplomacy had a free hand there wouldn’t be any wars. His name was Jermyn.”

Lance sat up. “Eh?” he said.

“Jermyn,” repeated Bertie. “What’s the matter, old man?”

“Nothing,” said Lance in a low voice. “What do you say?”

“This man, Jermyn, was out in India with my governor when I was a kid; about fourteen—no, more, sixteen. He used to say that diplomacy was the oil which kept the human machine working. Oh, how tired I am! If I don’t go to sleep this instant, I shall die.”

“Then die,” said Lance, almost roughly. “Who was this Jermyn?”

“He was a man who had the district where my governor was general. An awfully good fellow. He had a daughter—”

"A daughter," echoed Lance, his attention, his interest all alert.

"Yes, an awfully beautiful girl. Old Jermyn married a *begum*, a *rajah's* daughter—I don't know what you call 'em—but she was an awful swell. So was Jermyn, in his way. And Jermyn came into a tremendous lot of money by his marriage; he was also fearfully oofish on his own account."

Lance leant on his elbow and regarded the boy with feverish intensity.

"What—what became of him, and—and his daughter?" he asked, moistening his lips.

Bertie frowned, as if he were trying to remember; then he said:

"Oh, he went to England, he and his daughter. I remember my father said that old Jermyn had shaken the Pagoda-tree to some purpose, and that he was as good as a millionaire. I should say that his daughter must be worth a pretty considerable pile by this time. How's that arm of yours now, Le Breton?"

"Oh, it's all right," said Lance. And he turned over; but not to sleep.

CHAPTER XXII.

How could he sleep with the boy's voice still ringing in his ears, with Kyra's name vibrating, as it were, in the very atmosphere? And when he woke from the short, feverish sleep forced on him by sheer exhaustion, he was almost persuaded that he had dreamt the conversation; but it had had such an effect upon him that he could not bring himself to open the subject again to Bertie, who woke as fresh as paint and quite eager for another fight.

The doctor came in to look at Lance's arm.

"You'd better go on the sick-list, Le Breton," he said.

Lance frowned at him, and jerked his head impatiently.

"Nonsense," he said. "There's nothing the matter, at any rate, nothing to speak of. And it's only the left arm—which I don't use in this game; it will be all right in a day or two. It's a clean wound."

"That's right; teach me my business!" snapped the doctor. "Do you think I don't know a wound when I see it? It's clean enough, as you say; but you're deuced feverish, and ought to lie by."

"It isn't the wound," urged Lance. "I'm just a trifle out of sorts, got a little cold, perhaps. For Heaven's sake, don't

make a fuss about it and report it! You know how short-handed we are. And I tell you, I shall be all right, if you don't put me on the sick-list: *that* would make me sick enough in all conscience. Dry up; here's the colonel."

The colonel came in and looked round.

"Sorry to hear you were wounded last night, Le Breton."

"Not at all, sir," responded Lance, unblushingly. "Quite a mistake, isn't it, doctor?"

The doctor swore under his breath and hesitated a moment—but who could resist Lance?—and mumbled:

"Nothing to speak of, sir."

"I am glad," said the colonel, with a look of relief. "I should like to march as soon as the men are rested, for I hear that the enemy is in force in a town, or whatever they call it, on the bank of the Jubya; and I should like to get on them before they've time to entrench."

"Quite so, sir," said Lance. "I expect my men are ready enough at this moment; but I'll see and report, sir."

He tried to thrust Kyra out of his mind, as he went about his duties. As he had said, the men were quite ready to start at once; in fact, were as eager as Bertie himself. Lance's arm felt stiff and painful, but he nursed it as much as he could and succeeded in concealing his condition from his fellow-officers and the men. By noon they were on the march again, and Lance was free to think of Kyra.

So, she was right, if what Bertie had said was correct, and was not only wealthy but immensely so. A millionaire, Bertie had said. And no doubt he would presently get a letter from her informing him of her wealth and offering him half of it! His heart burnt with the smouldering fire of unrequited love and wounded pride. He would not touch a penny of her money, though he might be starving; he would fulfil his part of the contract, would not only never claim her but would never mention his marriage or remind her of his existence. She should never know that he had married her because he loved her, as well as because she had asked him to make her his wife for some reason not known to him. What was that reason? He had promised not to ask, and he had kept his promise; but he could not help thinking and wondering what it could be. Anyhow, whatever it was, no doubt the reason existed no longer; she was immensely rich, and wealth brings power and security.

Almost as if he knew the trend of his companion's thoughts, Bertie, as they strode along beside their men, returned to the subject.

"You remember my mentioning that chum of my father's, old Jermyn, Le Breton," he said.

Lance nodded and grunted.

"It has just occurred to me that I saw old Jermyn's death in the paper; so that his daughter must have got all the money and must be a tremendous swell. Of course, she would have been a swell without it, because her father was high up in the service, and was no end of a big pot out there: member of the Council and the rest of it, and his daughter was what you might call half royal; Indian blue blood, don't you know. Not that there was much of the Hindoo about her."

"You remember her?" said Lance le Breton, with an affectation of merely polite interest.

"Rather," responded Bertie. "No one who ever saw her would be likely to forget her. She was the loveliest creature you can imagine, even then; with the most beautiful hair and eyes, and, as I say, with nothing of the Hindoo about her; in fact, she was as English as they make 'em. I used to go with my father to visit the Jermyns. They lived in a kind of palace, in a sort of royal state, with a whole army of servants; and the girl—I can't remember her name, for the life of me—was treated like a young queen, and was surrounded by a very good imitation of a court. And she played the part well, by Jove, I remember; not that she put on any side; for instance, she was as sweet as buttermilk to me! Of course, I was awfully in love with her; naturally, for she was a little older than I was and seemed a kind of divinity. I wish I hadn't forgotten her name. It was rather a peculiar one, not Hindoostani, but something with a Scotch sound to it."

He pondered for a moment or two, whistling softly; then he stopped short, with a little laugh of satisfaction.

"I've got it," he said. "It was Kyra, Kyra Jermyn; that's it!"

Poor Lance was all of a-quiver. The name struck on his aching heart and sent the blood to his face. He could picture Kyra, as a child, a young girl, queenly, even in her girlhood, with that indefinable grace and imperial reserve which had helped him to his undoing.

"I am surprised you've never met them," Bertie said, musingly, as if he could not leave the subject alone. "You move in the best 'sasiety,' I know, Le Breton, and are connected with no end of swells. It's strange you haven't run across old Jermyn and his daughter. But, after all, it isn't. Those Indian swells so often settle down quietly, when they get back to England; bury themselves in Devonshire or Corn-

wall and try and look as if they'd never been of any consequence. I shall hunt them up when I get back to England. Now, suppose you say something. I'm having all the palaver."

"You talk enough for both of us," said Lance, rather ungratefully.

All through that day, as they forced and cut their way through the tropical jungle in an atmosphere like that of the hot room of a Turkish bath, Lance dwelt upon the information Bertie had given him in so coincidental a manner; and he pictured Kyra, somewhere in England, writing to offer him half her money. She would write quite calmly, in quite a business-like spirit, as if that transaction in the seedy little church was a purely commercial one; and he groaned inwardly, as he thus pictured her.

To his relief, they came next day upon the enemy, partly entrenched in a kind of townlet; and he was able to forget Kyra while the fight proceeded. It was a stiffer one even than that of the preceding night; but the brigade did itself credit and played the game, as Bertie declared with approval, for all it was worth. Notwithstanding the Martini-Henry with which the Ashantee were armed, they could not withstand the steady and dogged persistence of the British, who pressed closer and closer, regardless of their losses, until the half-formed trenches were carried and the place was theirs. The whole brigade did well, but Lance and Bertie particularly distinguished themselves; and no one was surprised when, the next morning, the colonel intimated that their names would appear pretty prominently in his despatches.

"This is what I distinctly and emphatically call 'good business,'" said Bertie, as he endeavoured to wash from his face the encrustation of dirt and powder which had temporarily transformed him into something like a Christy minstrel. "You'll get a captaincy out of this, Le Breton, as well as a bit of ribbon, and I shall get an honourable mention, which will make my fond mother cry: she always cries when I do anything respectable: I must say, with a certain amount of pride, that I haven't caused her many tears as yet. Yes, it's distinctly good business, though you don't look particularly overjoyed," he added, glancing at Lance, who was seated on an upturned biscuit-box, his elbows on his knees, his chin in his hand, as he smoked in a grim kind of satisfaction. He started slightly and frowned and checked a sigh. All unconsciously Bertie had hit the truth: what did it matter to him whether he got his company or not? What he wanted

was the heart of the girl whom he had married, and who would presently offer him a certain amount of filthy lucre, instead of her love; and unless he got that love, he knew that no amount of honours would satisfy him or even bring him consolation.

"Oh, that's all right," he said. "I'm glad the colonel spotted you, Bertie. You've done very well in this business, my boy, and deserve all you'll get."

"That sounds rather ironical," remarked Bertie, with a grin; then he added: "But I shouldn't have got anything, excepting a military funeral, if it hadn't been for you, Le Breton. I know you don't like me to speak of it, but that my mother has got her boy still to worry about is owing to the way you saved me from those niggers—"

"Oh, we've heard quite enough about that old song," said Lance, quickly. "Better change the sentry."

"All right, sir," said Bertie. "I was only going to add that, if you should think of exchanging, and can take anyone with you, perhaps you won't forget a pore, young chap, who kindly allowed you to save his life."

He retreated with a duck of the head to avoid the boot which Lance shied at him.

There were one or two other scimmages; but this "little war" was over for the present; the two battles had nipped it in the bud. The brigade soon after turned towards the coast, and in due course arrived there, bronzed and weather-beaten; but, as Bertie remarked, as hard as nails and as keen as tigers. Lance and he were dressing for mess on the night of their arrival—there were to be guests, swell ones, and a little bit of fuss over the successful warriors—when Spilkins, spruce as pipe clay could make him, came in with the letter-bag.

"Letters, sir," he said to Lance, saluting.

The two men took their letters, and Lance selecting one, tore it open with a trembling hand. It was from Kyra: no fear of his forgetting the writing! It was the letter in which she informed him that her father had lost all his money and that she was penniless. He read it and stared at it overwhelmed, well-nigh stupefied by this news which was so contrary to that which he had expected.

"Dear old *mater*!" exclaimed Bertie, who had stuck his letter by the dressing-glass, so that he could read it while he shaved. "She sends her kind regards to my friend, Mr. Le Breton, and hopes that neither of us will forget to see that our under-flannels are always dry. Dear old *mater*, she'd have several fits, if she knew how we—"

He stopped short and looked up to see if Lance were listening; and Lance, turning at the moment, the boy lowered his razor, and looked at him aghast; for Lance's face was white under the tan, and his eyes had an expression of grim import.

"Oh, is there anything the matter, Le Breton?" asked Bertie. "Not—not bad news, I hope?"

Was it bad? Lance drew a long breath. Good or bad, it was news that made him want to start for England at once; for Kyra was not rich but poor and therefore needed him. He hurried into his tunic.

"Yes, I've had news," he said. "I want leave."

Without another word he strode off to the colonel's tent, the letter still in his hand.

The colonel looked doubtful: he naturally did not like losing so good a man.

"Of course, if you must go," he said, reluctantly.

"Thank you, sir," said Lance, hoarsely, and hurried back to his tent.

"I've got leave, Gordon," he said. "Hi, Spilkins, pack up my things, sharp! You don't happen to know whether a ship is sailing?"

"No," said Bertie. "But I'll go and find out. Don't you worry, Le Breton. I'll help you to pack and get off; though I'm mighty sorry you're going."

Trying to be calm and to keep down his desire to flurry, Lance began his preparations, and he was in the midst of them when Bertie returned with a newspaper.

"By a piece of good luck, I've got this," he said. "I'll look up the shipping dates. Oh, Lord! I wish I were going with you! It's all the harder now the fighting's over. I shall miss you beastly bad. Is there any chance of you coming back to us?"

"I don't know," replied Lance. "I'm sorry to leave you, old chap; but I must go. Here, give me the paper!"

He took the paper from the boy's hand and began to hunt through the columns for the shipping dates.

"There's one sails to-morrow," he said. "I'm in luck!"

He was still looking at the paper, in a mechanical kind of way, when suddenly he uttered a cry. Bertie, who was kneeling at a portmanteau, sprang to his feet.

"Why, what?" he asked; for Lance was clutching the pole of the tent, as if for support, and his eyes were full of horror.

"Oh, my God—my God!" broke from his lips, in a gasping cry.

The paper dropped from his hand and he covered his face, as if to shut out the sight of something.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MAD! Kyra let her hands drop to her side and stood still, looking at the woman in stony amazement and despair; then she was about to pour out a passionate appeal, a prayer for mercy, for freedom; but she checked herself, and with that power of self-restraint, with the quiet, almost queenly dignity which displayed themselves at a crisis—were they indicative of the strain of royal blood in her?—faced the situation calmly.

"You are acting under a terrible mistake," she said, trying to smile, to speak steadily and even gently; for she realised that her only chance of escape lay in her being able to convince Mrs. Lambert—her keeper—of her complete sanity. "But no, not mistake! You—as well as myself—are the victim of villainy—"

"Ah, there you are!" Mrs. Lambert broke in. "Villainy—that proves I'm right in what I say. Your mind's gone astray."

Kyra put her hand to her brow.

"Let us go upstairs," she said, still more calmly. "I am tired, as you say; I shall be all the better for a night's rest. No, you need not be afraid"—for she saw an expression of suspicion and caution come into Mrs. Lambert's eyes—"I shall not attempt to escape."

"It wouldn't be any use, it wouldn't, indeed, my dear," said Mrs. Lambert. "The house is locked and barred everywhere."

"I understand," said Kyra. "I am a prisoner."

"No; you're only being taken care of; put it that way."

"I don't think there's much difference," remarked Kyra, forcing a smile. "But let us go upstairs."

Mrs. Lambert made way for her, and followed her closely; and Kyra entered her room and began to undress.

"Help me, please; I am so tired, and I am trembling," she said. "And now, will you listen to me? See, I am quite calm; I am scarcely angry now. I recognise that you are not to blame, that you are only doing what you think your duty, obeying the orders of—of the person who employed you—"

"That's right, miss," said Mrs. Lambert, with approval. "That's just it. I'm a professional nurse, and I'm responsible to your good guardian—"

"You mean Mr. Stracey Froyte?" said Kyra, the blood rushing to her head, her eyes flashing; but she controlled the passion of hate, of indignation, that threatened to overwhelm her at the sound of his name. "He is in a sense my guardian; but not 'good,' oh, not 'good.' Let me tell you who I am—God knows whom and what you believe me to be, what he has told you! My name is Jermyn, Kyra Jermyn. My father is dead. I am an orphan—"

Mrs. Lambert nodded.

"I know. I know! Why distress yourself, my dear?"

"—I have lately discovered that my father died a poor man instead of a rich one, as I had thought—"

The woman paused in the act of brushing Kyra's hair—for Kyra had reluctantly permitted her to see about it—and shook her head slowly.

"—And I asked my guardians, the people I have been living with, Mr. James Froyte and his wife and son, the man you have seen, who has just left the house, to let me earn my own living."

She paused for breath and to steady her voice, for she was determined to speak quietly and without heat or vehemence.

"Mr. Stracey told me that he had procured a situation for me with a lady named Malcolm, and brought me here, to meet her, he said. His mother, Mrs. Froyte, came with us. But by an accident she left the train at a junction—I don't know the name—I don't even know the name of this place! The rest you know. I find myself in this house alone with you, and a prisoner, and—and—you tell me that I am mad, that my mind has gone wrong. Wait, please! Do I seem to you like one insane? Do I talk, act, as if I were out of my mind? I was frightened—the shock was enough to frighten me—you will admit that; but I am frightened no longer; I can talk collectedly. I have given you an account of myself, a true account—"

Mrs. Lambert shook her head again.

"It's true enough up to a certain point," she said. "It always is. That's what makes the complaint you're suffering from so strange. It would deceive anyone but a professional, one who, like myself, has had experience. You've given me your right name—they don't always—but you're all wrong about your father dying poor. That's where the—the weakness, the fancy comes in, you see, miss. Your father died

well off, but his death was such a shock to you, that it overturned your mind, and you fancied you were ruined, and had to go out in the world. All this about a Mrs. Malcolm is mere imagination. There never was such a person; you've only kind of dreamt about her and the situation. Mr. Froyte, your good guardian, had to humour you, to pretend that he was taking you to some lady, to keep you quiet and to prevent you getting worse, really bad."

Kyra was silent a moment while she struggled with her emotion.

"And he told you that?"

"Yes, miss; he told me everything; how you and he was engaged to be married, and how the wedding had to be postponed."

Kyra caught her breath and stared straight before her, but shut her teeth fast to keep back the cry that threatened to escape her.

"The good gentleman was terribly upset in the telling me, when he engaged me; and no wonder! Such a beautiful young lady! And anyone could see how fond he is of you."

Kyra shuddered.

"Oh, no, no!" she cried, involuntarily. "It is a cruel lie, all of it, all of it! Engaged to marry Mr. Stracey Froyte! Ah, yes, this much is true: that he asked me, but I refused. Oh, I cannot talk calmly of it!"

"Don't trouble, don't trouble!" murmured Mrs. Lambert. "That's just where the hallucination comes in, miss. You're fond of him, right enough; leastways, you were until you lost—until these fancies came on you. It's generally the case. People, when they're a little wrong in their heads, almost always turn against those they're fond of."

"Then I must be mad indeed!" said Kyra, bitterly. "But why did he bring me here, to this place?"

"By the doctor's orders, miss, of course," replied Mrs. Lambert.

"To this—this gloomy house, remote and away from everywhere! It seemed to me that we were driving through a kind of wilderness, desert. And"—she looked round the poorly furnished room—"this is so different to the Elms, my own room."

"That's just it, miss," said Mrs. Lambert. "It was the doctor's idea. He thought the change would be good for you; it is sometimes. You see, if you'd been poor and living poorly, they'd have sent you to a comfortable asylum, one of the

private places where they have all kinds of luxuries, and servants to wait upon them; just to make the difference and create a change. And it's in reason, too, if you come to think of it. Now, take your case: it's only natural that you should miss all the comforts and luxuries you've been used to, and, missing them, you'll want to get back to them, and the mere wanting to will work the change in you and do you good."

Kyra felt inclined to hysterical laughter. The hideous plot was so hideously complete. Stracey had left no loophole in his elaborately built-up edifice of deceit.

"I see," she said, still with the same self-restraint. "You say you believe that I am rich?"

Mrs. Lambert smiled placidly.

"Oh, yes, miss. Your good guardian and future husband explained it all to me when he engaged me."

"Very well, then," said Kyra, repressing a shudder. "I will give you a large sum—I will undertake that you shall receive a hundred, two hundred pounds, if you will post a letter for me."

She was thinking of May, warm-hearted but brave May, to whom she would write in the full certainty that help would be forthcoming from her. As to the money, she could sell her jewellery.

"If you could post one letter for me—"

Mrs. Lambert's face flushed hotly, and she drew herself up with a gesture of wounded pride.

"I beg your pardon, miss," she said, indignantly. "I'm an honest woman, and I don't betray my trust for any amount of money. I gave your good gentleman the best of testimonials— What! me, Jane Lambert, as have nursed some of the most serious cases in the profession, take money from a patient! No, miss, you misunderstand my position—if you'll forgive me for saying so; as I said, I'm an honest woman!"

"Then help a poor girl who is in the power of an unscrupulous villain!" cried Kyra, extending her white arms imploringly.

It was a mistake; and she knew it, as soon as she had made it, by the expression of Mrs. Lambert's face. It grew hard and, so to speak, business-like.

"Unscrupulous villain!" Such a nice, sweet-spoken gentleman as your intended is, too! But, there! it's my fault, letting you talk so much; it's only made you worse. But you've found that it's no good talking, and that it would be better for you to remain quiet, and try and get rid of these

fancies. Here's your night-dress—*you 'poor!'* my dear, young lady; why, you've got things fit for a princess! The idea of your wanting a situation with a 'Mrs. Malcolm!' There, there! get to bed, and try and sleep it all off. Why, goodness me! you don't know how soon you'll get well; and, when you're married to that handsome, well-spoken gentleman, you must let me come and see you, just for the sake of old times. You won't mind me taking the candle: it's safer."

When the woman had gone, locking the door after her—oh, the sound of that turning key!—Kyra sank on her knees beside the bed and tried to pray; and though the mental torture was so great that no usual form of words would come to her, the heart's prayer was more eloquent than a spoken one. She rose from her knees and got into bed, and lay there staring through the darkness.

And as she lay, the thought, the remembrance of Lance le Breton flashed across her mind. He had asked her to write to him if ever she were in trouble and needed him, and he had promised to come to her, if even from the other side of the world. God knew that she was in trouble enough, a prisoner, in the power of the basest, blackest of villains; but she could not write, could not summon Lance le Breton, even if she would. It was a fitting punishment for her selfishness, her disregard of him and his future. She was his wife in name only, and now, when she might with reason call upon him for protection, she was powerless to do so; and if she were not, he was thousands of miles away and could not hear.

It was difficult when she awoke to realise where she was and the situation in which she was placed; but when she did so realise, she sprang out of bed and ran to the window; to find that it looked out upon a dreary garden enclosed by high and absolutely unclimbable walls. The word garden has been used, but the enclosed place was a square in which the weeds had almost obliterated the paths themselves. The trees were old and overgrown with lichen; a kennel stood under the lee of one of the walls, and the deep bark of a bulldog came now and again from it. The surrounding scenery was as desolate and forsaken as the garden; no house was in sight; a curve of the high-road cut across some dreary marshes from which a thick vapour, caused by yesterday's heavy rain, was rising. The house seemed to stand alone in this dreary, evil plain like a light-house.

Kyra literally recoiled from the window and the dreary, forbidding view. It was evident to her that no help could come to her from outside. She might be incarcerated there

for ten, twenty years, might even die there, and no one be the wiser. She shuddered as she dressed herself; but with the courage that was her heritage, the courage that had enabled her father to rule over half a million natives, she resolved to utter no moan, to accept the inevitable and reserve her strength and energy for the opportunity of escape, if opportunity offered itself.

When she had dressed herself she knocked loudly on the door, and Mrs. Lambert came up and opened it. Kyra met her calmly and even cheerfully—for, at any rate, Stracey was not here, and her keeper was a woman, and evidently an honest one.

"Oh, you're dressed! Breakfast's ready. I hope you've had a good night, miss, and that you're feeling better?"

"Oh, yes," said Kyra, forcing a smile. "That is, I am as well as usual."

Mrs. Lambert regarded her with professional keenness, and led the way down-stairs to the dining-room. Breakfast was laid, and Kyra tried to eat as if she had some appetite.

"What am I to do with myself all day?" she asked, with an affectation of ease.

"Oh, you can go out in the garden with me or you can read; and there's fancy work such as ladies like you are fond of."

Kyra laughed.

"Fancy work!" she said, with good-natured contempt. "I don't know any, but I should like some books; and, better still, I should like the garden. It looks dreadfully neglected. Why is that?"

Mrs. Lambert pondered for a moment; then she said:

"Well, you see, your good guardian and future husband"—Kyra shut her teeth hard—"was naturally averse to putting you in a private asylum—they're very trying, some of them—and hit upon this place by accident. It's been to let for some time, and it's a bit neglected, as you say, miss; but he don't want a license here. You see, there's nobody to know you're insane—I beg your pardon, miss; I mean, taken up with fancies."

"I see," said Kyra. "I should like to go into the garden."

They went into it presently. Mrs. Lambert paused at the kennel, and loosened the bull-dog.

"Stand back, miss, please," she said, significantly. "He's rather rough and dangerous; especially if anyone was to attempt to climb the walls, miss. He's a trained dog, miss."

The dog, when he was free from the chain at which he was

straining, dashed at Kyra; but she held her ungloved hand down to him and he sniffed at it, at first, suspiciously and then with an air of satisfaction, and wound up with licking it and pawing at her skirt.

Mrs. Lambert looked on with some surprise.

"I thought he was very fierce," she said. "Mr. Froyte said as I was to be careful with him."

"I am fond of dogs," said Kyra, taking the dog's black muzzle in her hand and pressing it into a ball. "I am never afraid of them."

"Well, now, I am all of a tremble, even when I am feeding him," said Mrs. Lambert.

"I am not afraid of him," said Kyra; "you must let me feed him; it will be something to do."

"Very well, miss," assented Mrs. Lambert; "but don't you think of getting over the walls. He's trained to stop that, as I say."

Kyra glanced at the high brick obstruction between her and freedom.

"I have not been thinking of it, Mrs. Lambert. When I leave here, it will be of your free-will and permission."

Kyra remained in the garden for the best part of the day, and the bull-dog stuck close to her heels all the time. It seemed to her that even if she attempted to climb the walls, he would not interfere. Slowly she paced the weed-grown paths, thinking of her fate, of Stracey's elaborate villainy—almost grotesque and impossible in this twentieth century—of her strange marriage with Lance le Breton. She had wronged him, entrapped him by her appeal to his chivalry, and this was her punishment. Yes; it was meet and fitting.

Mrs. Lambert—her keeper—called her and she entered the house and ate some food; then she begged to be allowed to go into the garden again, and, Mrs. Lambert permitting, she wandered about until dusk.

"Are you still obdurate, determined?" she asked, as Mrs. Lambert helped her to undress that night.

"If you mean am I determined to earn my wages, and look after you, miss: yes," responded Mrs. Lambert. "But I don't think I shall occupy this situation long, you seem such a sensible young lady, not to say pleasant. Why, the way that dog has taken a fancy to you is extraordinary: he won't let other strangers come near him!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

SEVERAL days passed and they were all of this pattern: a trying one for a girl in Kyra's position. But she was determined to meet the situation with an unwavering patience; and with the aid of Turk and some books which Mrs. Lambert discovered in an old box in one of the disused rooms, she beguiled the weary hours. And one fact helped her to bear her imprisonment: the absence of Stracey. To her usual dislike and distrust of the man was now added, and with reason, a loathing and dread; for to what lengths might not such a man be driven by his evil passion and utter unscrupulousness?

But the consolation of his absence was to be denied her, for one afternoon, as she was sitting under one of the old trees trying to fix her attention on her book—a volume of old plays—Mrs. Lambert ran out of the house to her.

"Here's your guardian, miss!" she said. "Now, now!" she exclaimed, soothingly, for the blood had rushed to Kyra's face and then left it pale to the lips. "You've no call to be upset or to be afraid; he's so anxious about you, and I told him you were better, oh, ever so much better; so try and be cheerful, and—and kind to him. There's no call to be excited or nervous."

Kyra made no response, but waited, her eyes fixed steadily on Stracey as he came down the path, treading with his light step, which had always seemed to Kyra to have something stealthy and feline in it.

"Well, my dear Kyra!" he said, in a tone of affectionate sadness, intended to reach Mrs. Lambert, as she discreetly disappeared.

Then he stopped opposite her and looked at her under his half-lowered lids. The imprisonment, and the excitement, and wear and tear of spirit and nerve it had produced, had already set its mark upon her, and she looked wan and pale; but though she shuddered at his presence, she regarded him steadily with an expression of scorn and loathing, from which most men would have quailed. But Stracey and conscience had long since parted company, and, though his lids drooped a little lower, his eyes met hers with something like triumph and callous satisfaction.

Turk had uttered a low growl of anger and dislike, and would have sprung upon the intruder, but Kyra caught him by the collar and held him.

"So you have made friends," said Stracey, as if he had only been absent a few hours, and they were meeting again under quite ordinary circumstances. "A very fine dog. I had a wonderful pedigree with him—good dog, then! Good dog!"

But Turk refused to be pacified, even though the voice was smooth and soft, and Kyra had hard work to hold him.

"Better chain him up," said Stracey. "He will interrupt our conversation, Kyra."

Kyra ignored the request and pressed Turk closer to her.

"Why are you keeping me here, a prisoner, Stracey?" she said, as calmly as she could, but her voice shook a little with indignation. "Why have you told the woman that I am mad?"

He smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Isn't that rather an exaggeration, my dear Kyra?" he said; but Kyra broke in with scornful impatience:

"Oh, please do not repeat the cruel fiction with which you have imposed upon her. I am not quite mad, you have told her, but 'the victim of an hallucination, of strange fancies.' Oh, yes, she has explained it all to me; and I do not want to hear it again. It is a wicked and a cruel lie. What I ask you is: Why have you done it? Why have you brought me here and are keeping me here? What is your object?"

"Your welfare, my dear Kyra, your welfare!" he said, suavely. "You were not at all well at Holmby; your health, never very robust, was sadly deteriorating, and your nerves—ah, yes, your nervous condition caused us all serious concern. It was thought wise to remove you to a more bracing climate—you find this air peculiarly bracing, do you not? Blowing across these marshes," he smiled sardonically; "and the repose, the quietude of your present abode—you appreciate the quiet and serenity of your surroundings, no doubt?"

Kyra's face flushed hotly under the subtle and hideous mockery of his affectation of concern and anxiety, but she remained silent, and waited.

"Does Mr. Froyte, Mrs. Froyte, know that you have brought me here, that I am detained by your orders, in a—a mad-house; for you have made it that?"

"Their cognisance or ignorance is of little importance," he replied. "That which is of importance is the hope that the change of air and scene may produce a beneficial change in your feelings, sentiments," he said, smoothly.

Kyra had determined that, if he came, she would keep her-

self well in hand, and retain her calmness and self-possession.

"What change did you expect, hope for?" she asked.

"An alteration in your sentiments regarding myself, my dear Kyra," he replied, with a faint smile. "I am convinced that your refusal to be my wife was caused by the condition of your health. To be quite frank and candid, you have been suffering from hysteria for some time past. It is a form of insanity—do not be alarmed; it is seldom permanent, and even the most serious cases are cured by proper treatment, by perfect quiet and rest—"

"By imprisonment in a half-ruined house surrounded by a waste of marshes; with no companions but—a keeper and a dog!" Kyra broke out for a moment, her eyes flashing, her proud lips quivering; but she regained her self-possession in a minute or two, and, looking at him steadily, went on: "You have succeeded in entrapping me, in dragging me here, and have succeeded in keeping me for some days; but do you think you can continue to do so? Any day, any moment, I may find some means of communicating with the outside world, I may be able to inform someone of the cruel trick you have played me, of the fact that I—perfectly sane, and my own mistress—am imprisoned here. This is not the middle ages, but the twentieth century, Stracey; and it is you who are mad to imagine that you can detain me here for any length of time. And it is only fair to warn you, to tell you that the moment I have escaped I shall seek the protection of the law which you have outraged. I warn you!"

"My dear, poor Kyra," he murmured, soothingly. "Don't you see that this very warning, as you call it, would, if I were as hard-hearted as you imagined me, only make me the more determined to—well, to prevent your escape? But, indeed, you forget the natural reluctance of the public to interfere in a case of lunacy. No, believe me, your only chance of leaving this pleasant retreat is in your own hands. You have only to recover from the hysteria from which you have been suffering and consent to—to take a proper view of life and its responsibilities—"

"I do not understand," she interrupted, scornfully. "Speak plainly. You cannot deceive me, Stracey, by a string of meaningless words. What is it you want of me? With what object have you shut me up here?"

"My only and most ardent desire is to see you restored to health and the full possession of your senses. That you had lost them—only temporarily, I hope and trust, my dear Kyra

—is proved by the fact of your refusal to marry me. I have never doubted your affection, oh, not for a moment, and I console myself in my grief and anxiety with the reflection that speedily you will be restored to your senses and to my arms, as my affianced wife."

A deadly pallor crept over Kyra's face. For an instant she was attacked by an almost insane desire to burst into a fit of hysterical laughter. The thing seemed so wildly, grotesquely improbable. She was to be kept there until she consented to marry Stracey Froyte!

Should she tell him that there was another reason, besides that of her hatred for him, why she could not marry him? She opened her lips, but checked herself. The secret was not hers only, but Lance le Breton's. No: she must keep that part of the bargain, at any cost.

Then there flashed across her brain the question: why did Stracey want to marry her? She was poor, he would not gain in wealth or position. Ah, but was she? Had he deceived her by some fiendish ingenuity in regard to her father's poverty or wealth, as he had deceived her by fiendish ingenuity in decoying her to this place?

"Why do you wish me to marry you?"

She asked him so suddenly and calmly that he was startled, and for a moment he stood regarding her keenly; then with a sigh and with an affectation of sad reproach, he said:

"Can you ask me, Kyra? How can you be so heartless? You know that I love you—"

She put up her hand and made a shuddering gesture to stop him.

"You doubt my affection, devotion!" he said, sadly; then, with a smile of hidden mockery: "You do an injustice to the sincerity of my attachment, my dear Kyra, to your manifold charms—"

"I am poor," she interrupted him, as if ignoring his protestations. "You would gain nothing by marrying me—at least, you tell me that I have no money, that I am penniless."

She looked at him steadily, searchingly; but he met her look with suave serenity.

"That is quite correct, I regret to say, Kyra; but it makes no difference to my feelings—"

"I do not believe a word you say!" she broke in, unable to restrain her burning indignation and repulsion. "I do not know whether you have deceived me in the matter of my father's money, as you have deceived me in others. If I am as

poor as you say, why, *why* do you wish me to marry you? It is impossible, yes; and there is an end of it; but I cannot understand why you wish it. Sometimes I think you must be mad, Stracey."

A peculiar expression passed over his face at her words, as if they had an import she did not of; then he smiled.

"Your treatment of me is enough to make me so," he said, softly. "Come, Kyra, it rests with you to end this—this unpleasantness. Let me call Mrs. Lambert, and tell her that this period of quietude and rest has produced the beneficial change we hoped for; let me tell her that the hysteria, the strange hallucinations have passed, and that your heart has returned to me. We can be married at once; indeed, there is no reason why the marriage should not take place here." She understood: she was not to be free, not to leave the place, until she was safely married to him. "My father and mother will not be able to be present, but we can go to them immediately after the ceremony; in fact," he added, significantly, "you can go where you please, then. Come, Kyra, be sensible and consent. It is horrible to see you shut up here."

"Yes, it is horrible," she said, fighting for calmness and self-possession. "Your father, Mrs. Froyte, do not know, you say, where I am?"

"Yes—certainly. You are on the Continent with Mrs. Malcolm, you know," he replied, with a faint smile. Then his manner changed, and he took a step towards her, his arms extended.

Kyra drew back with a faint cry of fear and loathing; the dog echoed it hoarsely and tugged at its collar.

"Take—take care!" she panted. "The dog! I cannot hold him much longer! Do not come nearer, at your peril, Stracey!"

He drew back and regarded her with a peculiar expression of unwilling admiration and fury.

"If the dog were not here—" he muttered between his teeth. The mask had slipped off, and he stood before her a self-avowed scoundrel. "You fool! Do you think you can defy me? Haven't I told you that when I have set my heart on a thing, I mean to have it—by fair means or foul? I have tried the fair means; it is you who compel me— As you are so attached to this place and your companions, remain here! Understand, think it well over; you will never leave it excepting as my wife!"

The temptation to loose the dog assailed Kyra strongly, but she fought against it.

"Then I will remain here until I die—or find some other means of escape!" she said, breathlessly. "Go now, Stracey; my hold on him is weakening, and—and he is strong and ferocious. I am not without a protector. Oh, go!"

Her cry, the hoarse barking of the dog, brought Mrs. Lambert to the back-door of the house; and as she came quickly towards them, Stracey, raising his hat to Kyra, went to meet her.

"Is anything the matter?" asked Mrs. Lambert. "Is she excited, upset?"

"Yes," said Stracey, with a sigh and a sad shake of the head. "I am afraid my visit has done her no good; quite the contrary. And she looked so much better when I first saw her! It is evident you have taken every care of her, Mrs. Lambert; but it is also evident that she has not recovered sufficiently to be able to see me. I fear—in my impatience—that I came too soon."

He played his part so well that the woman, astute as she was, was not only deceived, but moved to sympathy.

"Don't worry about it, sir," she said, soothingly. "It was too soon, that is all. I am quite sure she will recover, and that before very long; she's so sweet-natured and gentle. Why, until you came, she was as sensible as anybody could wish her to be. In fact, I was going to suggest that I should take her out for a walk once a day; you see, it's rather trying for her, cooped up here—"

Stracey shot a glance at her out of the corners of his eyes.

"Ah, do you think that would be wise, nurse?" he said, smoothly. "I'm afraid not! She might make a scene if you met anyone; and—you understand—it is desirable, for a lady in her position, that no one should know the sad circumstances of her case. I hope and trust a few weeks—perhaps, a few days, who can tell?—under your experienced care—No, I don't think I should let her leave the house; though I wish, with all my heart— But you can understand my feelings, nurse. To think that the mere sight of me, of whom she is really so fond, should upset her."

He turned his head aside and rapidly passed his handkerchief over his eyes; and was evidently so overcome that Mrs. Lambert was quite touched, and murmuring, "Poor gentleman!" got him a glass of wine.

Kyra, when Stracey's hateful presence had disappeared, caught the dog to her and kissed him.

"I am not quite friendless when you are here, Turk, dear!" she murmured, and he looked at her gravely with his great eyes, full of fury a moment or two ago, now lovingly soft and gentle, and put out his tongue and solemnly touched her cheek with it.

"Not quite friendless, Turk, dear," she repeated, hugging his big head. "You shall always be with me when Stracey comes; at any rate, he will not dare to *touch* me."

She sat for some time—the dog, tired with the excitement, and now, lulled by her caress, asleep beside her with his head on her lap—pondering over the scene that had just been enacted.

It was so strange, so improbable a one, that if she had met with it in a book she would have considered it ridiculously far-fetched and melodramatic; and it was only by glancing at the high walls and the sturdy figure of the nurse, who was hanging up some washing, that she could accept the reality of the situation. She thought it all out as well as her aching head and strained nerves would permit her. What was Stracey's object in concocting so diabolical a plot and carrying it out with an equally diabolical ingenuity? At the thought of his avowed object—that he loved her—a feeling, very near physical nausea, attacked her. But if it was not love, or passion—Kyra knew little or nothing of either—what was his object? Had she hit the truth when she told him that she could not believe his statement that she was poor? But even if he had lied to her, as to her poverty or wealth, how could her marriage to him benefit him?

Mrs. Lambert came down the garden to her.

"Are you better now, miss?" she asked, with evidently genuine concern. "I am so sorry you were upset—"

"Are you?" Kyra broke in. "Then do this: go to the nearest police-station and tell them that a young lady is kept here against her will, under the excuse that she is out of her mind. Let them come and take me before a judge—a magistrate—whatever you call them—and see for themselves—"

Mrs. Lambert sighed and shook her head.

"There, there, there!" she murmured, soothingly. "The idea! Police, magistrate! Why, you're only upset by seeing your good gentleman so suddenly. There's nothing in that! It'll pass off in an hour or two. It's a pity he came—so soon; for I'm sure and certain that you'll be all right in a very little time. Come in now, miss, and get your dinner. It's quite ready!"

"Mr. Stracey, has he gone?" asked Kyra, between her teeth.

For the moment she felt that her hatred of him would indeed drive her mad.

"Yes, yes! He's been gone half an hour and more," said Mrs. Lambert, "and dreadfully cut up he was by your treatment of him. Really, miss, you might have tried to be a little kinder— But what am I talking about! I'm forgetting that you're not yourself."

All that evening, and long after she had gone to bed, Kyra pondered over her dolorous situation. That she should think of Lance le Breton was only natural; but she felt that, even if she could communicate with him, she would not do so. He had already done enough for her. She would not remind him of her existence, would make no claim upon him, though she were in worse straits, if that were possible.

On the morrow her fate weighed upon her with a cruel heaviness. She thought of Stracey's threat. He could, and doubtless he would, keep her in captivity as he had threatened. She had read of persons who had lost their reason—or who had been said to lose their reason—being kept for years and years in seclusion until death came to release them from their captivity. Such might be her fate. Why not? The nurse was evidently convinced of her—Kyra's—insanity, delusion, and while she was paid, would retain her situation. The only persons who came to the dreary, solitary house were the trades-people, and Kyra knew that if she appealed to them, Mrs. Lambert's explanation of insanity would satisfy them and render them inoperative.

There seemed no chance of escape. A heavy weight seemed to lie upon her heart and mind. Many times during that day she felt, as many a poor soul in a like case has felt before, that she was indeed going mad. She fought for calm, fought for the capacity of recollection; recalled the past, the ball at Holmby Hall, the meeting with Lance le Breton, there by the stile; her talk with May, the dear, light-hearted girl she had learned to love; her marriage with Lance le Breton—her marriage: was she really mad and only dreamt it? Was he really her husband? At that moment she half doubted it. Too much brooding, too much self-communion will, so the doctors say, destroy one's reason. Was she really married, or had she only dreamt it? There was nothing tangible to prove it. If she had had a ring, a certificate, anything, however small, to help her to realise it: but she had nothing! Two days passed; the mental strain was beginning to seriously tell upon her.

She was happiest—the word is a mockery: she was least unhappy—when she was with Turk in the garden. The dog's devotion was the only thing that reconciled her to life.

One day, the third day after Stracey's visit, she was sitting in the garden, leaning against one of the trees, half asleep, if stupor can be called sleep, when she was aroused by the sudden growling of Turk, who was lying across her lap.

She opened her eyes and looked up and uttered a cry of amazed incredulity—she still thought herself asleep—for before her stood, beside Mrs. Lambert, Mrs. Froyte!

"Mrs. Froyte!" she cried, springing to her feet. "Down, Turk, down! Don't be frightened; he won't hurt you. Down, Turk. Oh, I am glad—glad!" She was so amazed that she did not rise, but gazed at the wan, haggard face of Mrs. Froyte as she would have gazed at a ghost. "How did you come— Why did you come?" she panted.

Mrs. Froyte regarded her with a strange expression. Affection, pity, seemed to be struggling with a subtle fear. She glanced at Mrs. Lambert, and Mrs. Lambert nodded as if she understood.

"It's your gentleman's mother, miss," she said. "I'll leave you; you'll have a good deal to talk about, I daresay."

Kyra caught Mrs. Froyte's arm.

"You—here!" she panted. "How did you know— How did you come— Oh, I can't talk plainly, I can't even ask an ordinary question! Does—does *he* know?"

Mrs. Froyte held the girl coldly from her.

"No; he does not know. I—I followed him."

"Stracey?"

"Yes; when I got that telegram—"

"What telegram?"

"The telegram saying you were just starting for the Continent with Mrs. Malcolm. I doubted—I was not sure—I was uneasy. I thought you would have written—"

"Yes, yes! I see. But why did you get out at the junction? Why did you leave me?" asked Kyra.

Mrs. Froyte looked as if she did not understand.

"What junction? You left me at Broad Street. The train started without me."

Kyra drew a long breath.

"Yes? No matter. Do you know that I am kept here, a prisoner? That the woman of the house thinks I am mad, out of my mind?"

Mrs. Froyte nodded.

"Yes; she has told me, explained," she said.

Kyra laughed, hysterically.

"I—mad, out of my mind! It is Stracey who has done it! Why, why, why?"

Her voice was almost a scream.

"Hush!" said Mrs. Froyte, in her toneless voice, and its absence of tone, of emotion, quieted Kyra as nothing else would have done. "We will talk of that presently. You want to know why I am here?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Because I followed, shadowed him. When I saw the telegram saying that you were starting for the Continent, I was suspicious. I knew that you would have *written*, if it were only a few lines."

"Yes, yes!"

"And I watched Stracey. I followed him here, to the station. I have been waiting for days. Kyra, I have come to save you—if I can."

"To save me?" echoed Kyra. "To save me? From what? Oh, speak!"

At this moment Mrs. Lambert came towards them.

"I hope you find her well, madame?" she said.

"Quite well, thank you," said Mrs. Froyte, in her toneless voice. "Much better than I expected."

CHAPTER XXV.

PERHAPS Kyra did not fully realise that Mrs. Froyte had come, and come to her assistance, perhaps her very salvation, until they were in Kyra's room alone that night, and were able to talk without the presence of Mrs. Lambert.

And even then, Kyra could not fail to notice that Mrs. Froyte's manner was cold and reserved, and that she repelled rather than welcomed any display of affection or gratitude on Kyra's part.

"Now, tell me everything," she said, drawing Mrs. Froyte to a chair, but she herself walking to and fro, restlessly. "I cannot think how you managed to follow Stracey without his discovering that he was being followed— Ah!" she caught her breath with a sudden fear and paused before Mrs. Froyte; "he may come again at any moment and find you here; and then— What will you do?"

Mrs. Froyte shook her head.

"He has gone abroad," she said. "He was to start to-day—for a week or ten days. It is on some business; I do not know what."

Kyra sighed with relief.

"Then we are safe for a week or ten days! You said out in the garden that you had come to save me—"

"If I could," put in Mrs. Froyte, coldly. "I do not know that I can. Stracey is clever, much cleverer than most men; the way in which he succeeded in getting you here proves that. He deceived me and his father—who know him."

Kyra sighed.

"Cannot Mr. Froyte help me? If you were to go and tell him that you have found me—and in what a condition?"

Mrs. Froyte shook her head.

"James would not move," she said, deliberately. "He is afraid of Stracey. He would have interfered before if he had had the courage; but he has not. He is weak as water—especially before Stracey. He would not dare to thwart him."

"Then there is no one but you!" said Kyra, stretching out her hands.

"And I—I am only a woman, like yourself."

"But—but surely, you are not afraid!" Kyra urged.

"You have only to go to the nearest police station—as I have asked Mrs. Lambert, the nurse, to do, times out of number—and tell the whole story and I am saved—"

"And my husband and his son are lost," concluded Mrs. Froyte, coldly. "No; I cannot sacrifice my husband, even to save you, Kyra: you must see that."

Kyra made a gesture of despair.

"Yes, I see! Oh, how hopeless it seems! And how hard and cruel! What have I done that I should be made to suffer, that I should be so ill-treated—"

"You have come in Stracey's way in some fashion or other," said Mrs. Froyte, as coolly and deliberately as if she were discussing a question of millinery, "and it would be bad for anyone who came in his way, who stood between him and some object upon which he had set his heart."

"Heart!" echoed Kyra, bitterly. "Stracey's heart!"

"You are right; he has none," assented Mrs. Froyte. "That is what makes him so dangerous, so difficult to meet. He has no heart and therefore no scruples."

"How do you hope, think, of helping me?" broke in Kyra. She grew impatient of this analysis of Stracey's nature. "You have come to me at some peril. I suppose—"

"At great peril," put in Mrs. Froyte, grimly.

"It seems to me that you are powerless to help me, that it would be better, kinder to me, who do not wish to see you injured, punished, by Stracey, if you went and left me!"

"No," said Mrs. Froyte. "I will remain, at any rate, until Stracey returns. I may see some chance—"

"Chance!" something like a laugh escaped Kyra's trembling lips. "Do not flatter yourself! There is none, there will be none. Every window is barred; the hall-door is always locked, and the key is in Mrs. Lambert's pocket; you saw the garden walls—are they such as a woman could climb? If you will not demand assistance from outside—from the authorities—oh, it is of no use appealing to the trades-people: no one will help an insane person to escape; the mere word 'insane' would be sufficient to deter them: I can understand that; I do not blame them! If you will not do this, what will you, can you do? Ah, far better go and leave me."

Mrs. Froyte shook her head.

"I have come, and I shall stay," she said. "We shall see."

Kyra sighed and fell to pacing to and fro again; then she softened a little.

"How ungrateful I am!" she said, penitently. "I am forgetting the risk you ran in coming to me. Forgive me!"

She would have bent and kissed the pale, sad face, but as if she dreaded the caress, Mrs. Froyte rose and moved towards the door.

"You must go to bed," she said, coldly; "my unexpected arrival has upset you; you are not looking well, not as well as when I came."

"Oh, I am all right," said Kyra; but her head felt heavy and hot, and her hands were burning. "One moment! All the time I have been here I have been asking myself, worrying myself with the question: Why has Stracey done this to me; why does he want me to marry him? He does not care for me—as you say, he is without heart. Is it because I have money, because I am rich and not poor, as he said? I asked him, ascribed that reason to him the other day when he was here. Have I guessed rightly?"

"I cannot tell," said Mrs. Froyte. She paused with her hand on the handle of the door. "If it is, what would you do? Would you be prepared to yield this money to him? It is a strange thing to ask—and for me to ask it, but—"

Kyra threw her hands above her head wearily.

"Oh, yes, yes, a thousand times yes!" she said, excitedly. "I would give it all up to him, would relinquish every penny of it if I could be assured of freedom and the fact that I should never see him again." She shuddered. "Yes; let him take every penny."

She paused suddenly, for the remembrance of Lance le

Breton flashed across her brain. What right had she to relinquish, at any rate, his half of the money? She stopped and looked straight before her steadily, vacantly, and the colour stole to her face.

"I—I don't know," she said, almost to herself. "I have not thought—why should I do it? It was my father's money—if there is any, it is mine; half of it is—" She stopped and paused, as if she had suddenly remembered Mrs. Froyte's presence.

"Why should you?" asked Mrs. Froyte, coldly. "I only asked the question. It is one for yourself alone—"

"No," Kyra broke in; then checked herself. "I will consider," she said, in a low voice.

Mrs. Froyte nodded in an impassive fashion.

"Good-night," she said.

"Good-night," responded Kyra. "And thank you for coming. I know you will do all you can for me—"

"I will do everything—except sacrifice my husband," said Mrs. Froyte, as she opened the door and went out.

Kyra scarcely slept that night. Either the sudden shock of seeing Mrs. Froyte, or the excitement caused by the hope of freedom, produced a kind of fever, which rendered her incapable of getting up the next morning. The room seemed to spin round with her when she attempted to rise, and she fell back dizzy and half fainting. Mrs. Lambert, when she came with the hot water, found her in this condition, and went to fetch Mrs. Froyte.

"She has been so well all the time, too!" said Mrs. Lambert, in a low voice, as they stood beside the bed. "She's such a strong young lady, you see; and she spends most of her time in the garden—"

"I am quite well; it is nothing," said Kyra, impatiently, for she dreaded lest her illness should interfere with any plans Mrs. Froyte might have formed on her behalf. "I have had a bad night; I shall be all right presently."

"It looks like fever," said Mrs. Lambert, in an under-tone to Mrs. Froyte, as they withdrew to the window. "Mr. Stracey said that she was subject to sudden attacks; and he gave me some medicine for her. I'll fetch it."

She went down-stairs, and Mrs. Froyte returned to the bedside.

Kyra stretched out a hot hand to her.

"You—you will not leave me, Mrs. Froyte?" she said, in a thick voice. "Whatever happens, you will not leave me? He may come—" She half rose on her elbow and stared into

vacancy, with an expression of vague terror in her beautiful eyes.

"I will not leave you," promised Mrs. Froyte; and Kyra, with a sigh of relief, sank down again, murmuring:

"Give me some water—I am so dreadfully thirsty."

Mrs. Froyte left the room to get some, and met the nurse on the stairs.

"This is it," she said, holding up a small bottle. "Mr. Stracey said it was medicine she was accustomed to—some that had been prescribed."

Mrs. Froyte took the bottle.

"Quite right," she said. "Will you bring some water, please?"

She recognised the bottle. It contained the medicine which Doctor Graham had sent Kyra. Mrs. Froyte, always bearing in mind his caution against administering more than the prescribed dose, had always kept it in her own room. Stracey must have taken it from the chest of drawers on which it had stood.

Mechanically she carried the bottle to the window and, as mechanically, glanced at the label. As she did so, her white face went whiter, and she almost let the bottle fall. She looked at the label again, the hand that held the bottle shaking so that she could scarcely read the directions. Then she stifled a cry and stared before her with horror and terror in her pale eyes.

The direction indicated just double the dose which she had been in the habit of giving Kyra. She stood still as a statue for a moment or two, then she examined the bottle closely. Closely, minutely, as was the examination, she was only just able to see, so skilfully had the alteration been made, that the word "tea" had been changed to "table."

Another woman, one less self-contained and frigid, might have called out in her horror, might very naturally have dropped the bottle; but the terror faded from Mrs. Froyte's eyes, and gave place to a cold and calculating expression, and, with set lips, she went back to the bedroom with the bottle still in her hand.

"Here is some of your old medicine, Kyra," she said in a still, toneless voice. "It is fortunate you brought it with you."

"I did not," said Kyra, indifferently. "At least, I think not. You may have put it in one of my boxes: did you? But no, you could not; I should have found it when I un-

packed: but Mrs. Lambert helped me, I remember. She may—oh, it does not matter!" she broke off, indifferently.

"No," assented Mrs. Froyte, still in the same impassive way. "Let me see; we have to be careful of the dose," she added, as she measured out a tea-spoonful. "I think I had always better give you this medicine, Kyra. Do not let anyone else do so. Will you remember, please? You are not to take it from any other hand than mine—after this."

Kyra made a gesture of assent with her hand; Mrs. Lambert came in at this moment with the *carafe* of water, and Mrs. Froyte added the proper quantity of water to the dose, and handed it to Mrs. Lambert. Kyra drank it.

"Yes; it is the same medicine," she said, faintly, as she sank down again.

"I hope it will do her good," said Mrs. Lambert. "There's nothing like a medicine you've been accustomed to."

"No," said Mrs. Froyte. "When—when did Mr. Stracey give you this?"

She asked the question calmly and almost indifferently, and she and the nurse were at the other end of the room, too far from Kyra for her to hear Mrs. Froyte's low-pitched voice.

"It was the last time he came," replied Mrs. Lambert. "He said he didn't think the poor, young lady was looking quite so well, though I didn't see any difference. But she certainly was upset, very much upset, at seeing him. It's always the way when they're suffering from the delusions and fancies poor Miss Jermyn's suffering from. He took it from his pocket, just as he was going, as if he had suddenly remembered it. And little wonder his forgetting it; for he must have been so upset by the painful meeting with her; and he so fond of her! Oh, anyone could see that, poor gentleman. By the way, what did you do with the bottle? I didn't notice how often she was to have it. Mr. Stracey said I was to be careful of the dose, as it was a powerful tonic: but, of course, one is careful of the dose whatever the medicine is. It's one of the first things one learns."

"Yes," assented Mrs. Froyte. "I'll keep the bottle in my room, and give her the dose according to the directions."

Mrs. Lambert nodded.

"I'll go and get a cup of tea for her," she said.

Mrs. Froyte found Kyra asleep. She sat beside the bed, her eyes fixed on the bottle on the chest of drawers, her lips tightly set, an expression on her face hard to describe: it was that of a person who is sitting face to face with death, death clad in a crafty disguise, death grinning fiercely behind a

mocking mask: and the mask bore the likeness of Stracey's sinister face.

Still more difficult to describe the thoughts that sped in wild confusion through her brain. Whose hand but Stracey's could have altered the word on the label, the one word that changed security into a deadly peril? A shudder swept over her, and her thin hands clutched each other as she stared gloomily before her. Kyra was in Stracey's way and he meant to get rid of her. How could she, a helpless woman, save this fatherless, friendless girl whom it was her duty to protect? Even if she succeeded in thwarting this diabolical plot of Stracey's, he would be ready with another: she knew, or could guess at the infinite resources of his ingenious mind. How could she hope to succeed in saving Kyra from future attempts?

There was the one way Kyra had pointed out: she could go to the nearest police station. She half rose, then sank down again, her face set, her teeth clenched. She was a wife before all else: she could not betray her husband; for she knew that the law would deem James Froyte an accessory to Stracey's guilt.

She watched with Mrs. Lambert by Kyra all day, and had a mattress thrown beside the bed so that she could remain for the night. The temperature dropped gradually, but in the morning Kyra was so much weaker that Mrs. Lambert suggested a doctor.

"I wish I knew Mr. Stracey's address," she said, regretfully; "but, strange to say, I don't. He's never told me, and I've forgotten to ask."

"Mr. Stracey is abroad," said Mrs. Froyte, in her impassive way.

"I really think I'd better get a doctor; don't you think so, ma'am?"

Mrs. Froyte thought for a moment or two, then she assented.

"There's one in the village," continued Mrs. Lambert, musingly, "but I don't know much about him. He's only recently come here, the baker's man told me. I think I'll send word to him. I don't like this sudden drop in the temperature."

Mrs. Froyte was not alarmed. She was accustomed to the symptoms which Kyra sometimes displayed just before one of her strange trances; but she did not say so; and Mrs. Lambert left the room resolved to send for the doctor. When she came in again an hour later, she said that she had done so.

"And I'm sure we've done the right thing, ma'am," she added, as she stood and looked at the beautiful face tossing with a kind of weak restlessness upon the pillow.

CHAPTER XXVI.

TOWARDS evening, Kyra, who had been lying for some time more quietly, with her eyes closed, opened them and stretched out her hand to Mrs. Froyte.

"I have been thinking," she said, in a low voice. "It was selfish of me to ask you to promise to stay. I was nervous and frightened; but I am all right now, and I want you to go. You must not get into trouble—make Stracey angry. I shall be quite—safe. Mrs. Lambert will be here. Besides, why should I be afraid, what harm could he, or anyone, do me? It—it is absurd!" She tried to laugh, but it was a pitiful attempt and failed. "Mrs. Lambert will take care of me, and I shall be all right. When you get home you can write, too, and I will write—ah, no, I forgot, they will not let me write!—but Mrs. Lambert shall write and tell you how I am: but I shall be better in a day or two: I suppose it was the strain: the pleasure, shock, of seeing you that upset me. If you go at once, you will be at home before Stracey returns, and he will never know that you have been here. I will ask Mrs. Lambert not to tell him."

Mrs. Froyte shook her head; but Kyra still urged her.

"Indeed, I shall be all right!" she pleaded. "I am anxious about you, more anxious than about myself. And you know I have my old medicine—"

Mrs. Froyte repressed a shudder.

"I know," she said. "But I shall not leave you, Kyra. Try and get some sleep."

A few moments afterwards Mrs. Lambert came up and whispered that the doctor had arrived; and Mrs. Froyte went down to him. She found a young, a very young man—indeed, he looked little more than a boy—waiting in the dining-room. He seemed very nervous and *gauche*, and shuffled and fidgeted with the affectation of ease which is always so unsuccessfully assumed by the shy.

"Er—how d'y do?" he said, glancing at Mrs. Froyte with a rather vacuous smile and instantly averting his eyes. "Sorry to hear your daughter's ill: not surprised, though: beastly place this: never was in any place quite so beastly. Oh, I'm not the resident doctor," he explained, in answer to

the faint surprise on Mrs. Froyte's countenance. "I'm only a *locum tenens*—I'm taking the place of Doctor Marshall, who's bolted—that is, he's gone for a holiday: got the ague: not surprising that, either: I wonder anyone can live in such a hole: I'm queer myself—but what's the matter with your daughter?" he broke off, as if he had suddenly remembered his patient.

"I think it is low fever," said Mrs. Froyte, in her subdued way. "She is not very strong—she is staying here for quiet and rest, Doctor—"

"Gills is my name," he murmured, shyly, as he fidgetted with his hat and his gloves, and stared about him with anything but intelligent eyes. It struck Mrs. Froyte that the poor boy found his probably novel responsibility weighing heavily upon him. He was so young that he could have obtained his diploma only very recently. "I'm a friend of Doctor Marshall's—or I shouldn't have come here. And I sha'n't be sorry to go. It's what they call a wide practice, and most of the patients are chronics and incurables: and no wonder! Have you noticed the mists over these marshes? Bad as the west coast of Africa, I should say. What on earth made you fix on this place to bring your daughter to? Ah, well! reasons, no doubt. I'll go up and see her! I should have been here before but I've only just come in from a long round, and I've had nothing to eat since breakfast, except a cup of milk—and that's poor eating: but one mustn't complain: it's hard enough to get a decent practice nowadays. Low fever, you say? Is she constitutionally strong?"

The light had nearly gone as he entered the room; and Mrs. Lambert brought a candle to the bedside. The young doctor was rendered still more nervous by Kyra's beauty and the evident fact that she belonged to a much higher class than that of Doctor Marshall's other patients, and he coloured and stammered painfully as he asked his stereotyped questions.

Kyra answered him with a kind of gentle patience and sufferance; and after a very superficial examination, he murmured something about "low temperature and want of tone," and went down-stairs.

Mrs. Froyte followed him and stood with downcast eyes while he fidgetted with his hat and gloves again. She saw that he had completely failed to diagnose the "case."

"It's low fever, as you say," he said, after a time. "She's got a chill, or run down below par: it's common enough in this district. Perhaps the heart's a bit weak. I found traces of *cardiac insufficiency*. She'll want building up, and—and

careful nursing. I understand that the nurse you have in attendance is a professional, duly qualified?"

Mrs. Froyte inclined her head.

"Yes, yes! Quite so. I'll send you some medicine and will call to-morrow. You say she hasn't slept very well, not a natural sleep? Better exhibit a soporific," he muttered to himself. "Can't do any harm. By the way, I didn't catch your daughter's name."

"Miss Jermyn—Kyra Jermyn," said Mrs. Froyte.

"Eh? Oh, ah, yes! Thought it was something else. Jermyn, yes, yes! Well, we'll soon put her all right, I hope, Mrs. Jermyn."

Mrs. Froyte did not correct his mistake and give her right name: what did it matter?

"May I offer you a glass of wine?" she said.

He accepted promptly and with a poorly concealed satisfaction; and he drank a couple of glasses of sherry and ate some biscuits with obvious enjoyment: very few of Doctor Marshall's patients offered the poor young *locum tenens* refreshments.

"Yes; I'll call to-morrow: earlier," he said. "Keep her up as well as you can—beef tea and that sort of thing, you know—there's a tendency to running down, a want of tone and spring: usual symptoms in this kind of case. Good-evening."

When he had gone, Mrs. Froyte stood in the dimly lighted dining-room looking before her fixedly. Had the doctor been an older, more experienced man, she might have been tempted to confide, or partially confide, in him; but this beardless boy, with his nervousness and *gaucherie*, could not help her. She, and she alone, stood between Kyra and Stracey's nefarious designs.

"Oh, why did you send for him?" said Kyra, wearily, when Mrs. Froyte returned to her. "He looked worse than I do, and so very tired, poor boy! If I could only sleep without dreaming, I should soon be all right. Ah, and if you would only go!"

The medicine arrived an hour or two later, and Mrs. Froyte gave Kyra a dose. It induced sleep; but it is a question whether the sleep was not purchased too dearly. Can one ever buy sleep, excepting at too heavy a price? For Kyra's temperature in the morning was still lower, and she seemed weaker and more inert. Mrs. Froyte was familiar with the symptoms: but they puzzled Mr. Gill, when he arrived in the afternoon.

"Action of the heart is feeble," he said, rubbing his chin—perhaps with unconscious sympathy, for that feature was certainly feeble, whatever Kyra's heart may have been. "I'll send her a cardiac: heart tonic, you know. Slept well last night, you say? Oh, yes; that's all right! There's no cause for er—anxiety, I assure you."

He took his couple of glasses of wine and biscuits with the same badly concealed eagerness which he had displayed on the previous evening; and when he had gone, Mrs. Froyte stood and gazed into vacancy as before. She was not anxious, because she knew that Doctor Graham had declared Kyra's heart to be perfectly sound.

Kyra was rather better after the administering of the tonic, and during a greater part of the day Mrs. Lambert—who had some washing to do—left her to Mrs. Froyte's care. Kyra lay with closed eyes thinking, dreaming, of Lance le Breton and that strange wedding at Benstead; and Mrs. Froyte sat beside the bed, hour after hour, in silent thought. Only herself between Stracey and Kyra!

The next day Kyra felt so much better that she wanted to get up: but, on attempting to rise, she found that she was too weak to do so, and she fell back with a sigh of weariness and impatience.

"Oh, if I were only a man, instead of a weak woman!" she said, almost to herself. "The world was made for men; we are here only on sufferance."

"And to suffer," said Mrs. Froyte, impassively.

"But, though I cannot help being a woman, I do not intend to remain a weak one much longer," said Kyra. "Please get me strong again as soon as possible. I want to think, to act, if I can."

"What can you do?" asked Mrs. Froyte, grimly.

Kyra laughed bitterly, and tossed the hair from her face.

"I don't know. I feel as if there were nothing I would not do to get out of this place, to obtain my freedom. You asked me the other day whether I would surrender my money—if I have any—"

"Would you?" Mrs. Froyte broke in, slowly.

"Yes, yes! The other day I was—doubtful; but I am certain now. I would sacrifice anything for my liberty. Oh, if I could only get away, hide myself under another name, bury myself—No, I must work; I want to work, to be of some use in the world. While I have been lying here, I have envied the trades-people who have come to the door whistling and smoking; the girls, whom I have seen from the

window, tramping to the match-factory on the other side of the marsh—Mrs. Lambert told me about them: they die, or are paralysed by the phosphorus—ah, yes! I know; but they are free, they have worked! I could face poverty, danger cheerfully—anything but this!”

“Are you sure?” asked Mrs. Froyte, with a kind of cold earnestness. “You don’t know what poverty, solitude mean, Kyra.”

“No, I don’t,” retorted Kyra; “but I know what this means; and I would rather die than be shut up here in Stracey’s power. Have you thought of nothing, have you no plan that will help me to escape?” She broke off abruptly. “Oh, forgive me!”—as Mrs. Froyte shook her head—“how should you? Don’t think me ungrateful! God knows I am grateful to you for coming to me, for staying with me: though I wish you would think of yourself and go now. You must go before Stracey comes.”

“I shall not leave you,” said Mrs. Froyte. “Stracey cannot come for some days.”

Kyra was silent for a moment or two, then she said:

“When he comes, I will make a proposal to him—”

Mrs. Froyte turned her pale eyes upon her attentively.

—“I will offer to give him any money I possess.”

Mrs. Froyte shook her head.

“He would not take it. There is only one way—”

“You mean by marrying him?” said Kyra, with a shudder. “I would rather die!”

She fell into a restless sleep soon afterwards, and Mrs. Froyte went down to bring up some tea. A wind had risen and was sweeping the rain across the dreary marshes, turning the dusk into darkness and making the desolate place more hideous even than usual.

Soon after she had gone, Kyra woke, and finding herself alone, made another attempt to get out of bed. To her infinite relief and satisfaction she found that she could stand; and, supporting herself by the furniture, she got her dressing-gown and went to the window against which the rain was beating with a monotonous sound that fought for predominance with the wailing of the wind.

She leant against the side of the window and looked out. The prospect looked as full of despair as that of her future, and she was turning away when suddenly she was overtaken by giddiness and faintness. The floor seemed to float up to her like waves over a smooth beach, then receded, carrying her spirit with it. She staggered about, and clutching at a

chair and table, made her way to the bed; but she had scarcely found it when the darkness swept down upon her, and, with a long sigh, she fell back upon the bed, her arms extended, her face pallid and death-like.

Mrs. Froyte, coming in with the tea, stopped short and looked at her in stony inaction for a moment; then she set down the tray, and, going to the bed, bent over the apparently lifeless form.

As she did so, a thought, an idea, flashed across her mind, as lightning flashes into a darkened room, illumining with startling distinctness every minute detail. She caught her breath and drew back, as if aghast at the idea, and her breath came and went in painful gasps. She sank into the chair beside the bed, and staring before her, and not at Kyra, seemed to be wrestling with something vague and intangible, as one wrestles in a dream with some shadowy vision, horrible, persistent, and not to be denied.

After awhile—moments are ages in such circumstances—she rose again and closely scrutinised the face and form of the unconscious girl.

Kyra was in one of her strange trances; one deeper, more death-like than any Mrs. Froyte had seen. There seemed to be no pulse, no sign of breathing; the face, indescribably lovely in its clear pallor, bore no sign of life.

Mrs. Froyte straightened herself, as if every movement were difficult, as if she were fettered by the idea that had descended upon her and had now taken complete possession of her, and, going to the head of the stairs, called for Mrs. Lambert.

The nurse hurried up—for there was something significant and alarming in Mrs. Froyte's summons—crying:

"Yes, yes! I am coming!" Then she stopped, aghast at Mrs. Froyte's face. "Oh, what is the matter, what has happened?"

Mrs. Froyte pointed to the bedroom and Mrs. Lambert hurried in. At sight of the still form lying on the bed she uttered a faint cry and ran to it.

"She has fainted, hasn't she? Why, she has got up—that's while you were down-stairs, getting the tea!"

She paused a moment, then cried out with sudden terror as she bent over Kyra:

"Oh, Mrs. Froyte! Mrs. Froyte! What is it! Is she—is she—my God, she isn't *dead*!"

Mrs. Froyte stood beside the bed like an image of stone.

"The doctor!" gasped Mrs. Lambert. "I'll—I'll fetch him. Oh, dear! oh, dear! I'm all dazed! Oh, poor, dear,

sweet young lady! Oh, the doctor! I'll go for him! You're not afraid to be left! Oh, I don't know what I'm doing, saying! The doctor! Not that it's of much use! But—yes; I'll fetch him!"

She ran down the stairs and Mrs. Froyte heard the door unlocked, opened, and slammed to.

Mrs. Froyte bent over Kyra, and drew her limp, unresisting arms across her breast; then she sat down beside the bed again and waited and thought. Thought so hard that her usually impassive face was lined and haggard.

Was it possible? There were many such cases on record; cases of trances so deep, so prolonged, that the persons under them had been actually buried. It was a chance, a risk. Kyra might remain in this condition for days, or she might return to consciousness at any moment. Could she, Mrs. Froyte, dare to run the risk? She shuddered as she asked herself the question. Then she thought of Stracey, of Stracey's fiendish unscrupulousness, of the diabolical ingenuity with which he had already entrapped and imprisoned Kyra, and a shudder, stronger than the first, shook her while she was still reflecting, her resolution swaying this way and that as her desire to save Kyra, and her fear of failure, impelled it. She heard the key turned in the hall-door, and footsteps hurrying up the stairs.

The doctor and Mrs. Lambert came into the room. By the light of the single candle Mrs. Froyte saw that the lad had been drinking. His face was flushed, but in blotches, his eyes were watery and even more unsteady than usual.

"How d'y do? Eh? What's this?" he stammered. "Fainted? Dead? Eh, what?"

He leant over the slim, girlish figure, stretched straight as an arrow on the bed, and took the lifeless hand in his as he felt the pulse. He drew down the under eyelid and put his ear to her heart, then he drew himself upright, and, looking from one woman to the other, said:

"Sorry: can't do anything: can't indeed. She's dead. Failure of the heart. Was afraid of it from the first: said so, if you remember. Very sad, very!"

Mrs. Froyte covered her face with her hands, the nurse caught her breath in a sob.

"Oh, are you sure?" she gasped. "Can't you do anything? Are you quite sure? She was all right just now, this afternoon. I can't believe—"

Mr. Gill eyed her with an expression of wounded dignity.

"Am I sure? Well, I should hope I could tell a live per-

son from a dead one, nurse! Life has been extinct for some time; an hour or more. Very sad, very! I—I wish Doctor Marshall had been here. Great responsibility for a substitute. This is the third patient who has gone off since I came. Very unpleasant. Have you a glass of wine? You'll want a certificate, eh? Yes, yes; of course."

Mrs. Lambert went down-stairs with him and gave him the wine; and after a time he took his departure. When Mrs. Lambert went upstairs again, Mrs. Froyte met her at the door. Mrs. Froyte was as white as death, white to the lips, and almost speechless.

"I'll—I'll do what is necessary," she said, hoarsely, and she closed the door almost in Mrs. Lambert's face; but Mrs. Lambert was not offended: it was very natural that Mrs. Froyte should wish to be alone in her sacred ministrations to the dead.

The next morning there was the hushed but heavy tread of the undertaker's men on the stairs; the tread that was to be heard in the grim, desolate house so many times during the next few days, through which Mrs. Froyte asserted and maintained her right of remaining in sole attendance on the dead. No one resented or questioned this right, though Mrs. Lambert often implored Mrs. Froyte to take some rest and allow her to share her watch. But Mrs. Froyte remained firm; not to say obstinate. Once only was Mrs. Lambert permitted to enter the death-chamber—on the day on which the coffin was to be screwed down.

The sight of the beautiful face, lovely in its perfect simulation of death, as it lay on a pillow of lace and flowers which formed a halo, brought the tears to Mrs. Lambert's eyes, so that she gazed at it through a mist.

"It's dreadful, dreadful!" she gasped, chokingly, as she left the room. "Such a beautiful young lady; and so gentle and sweet! Whatever the good gentleman, Mr. Stracey, your son, will say, I do not know! And to think that she'll be buried before he can come back to see her! You don't know his address, you say, ma'am?"

"No," said Mrs. Froyte in her impassive way.

"Oh, it's terrible, terrible!" exclaimed Mrs. Lambert. "Now, ma'am, you must let me sit up beside the coffin to-night, you must, indeed! I insist!"

Mrs. Froyte shook her head as she drew back into the room, her hand upon the door.

"No; no one but myself," she said, coldly, but firmly, and *Mrs. Lambert, still weeping, yielded and retired.*

Mrs. Froyte waited until the nurse's footsteps had ceased, then she closed the door and locked it; and, with a sense of suffocation threatening to overcome her, sprang to the coffin and unscrewed it with a screw-driver which she had purchased in the village.

It was by no means easy work for a woman; but still harder work lay before her—harder and more risky. She bent over the white face and kissed it; then, with a kind of passionate resentment, tore the flowers and lace from their place and raised Kyra's head to her bosom.

The face was still the face of one that had passed the portals of death; but Mrs. Froyte, nerved by the terrible peril with which the situation was fraught, could regard it without terror or collapse. Still holding the lifeless form to her bosom, she administered the medicine which Doctor Graham had prescribed, and, after a few minutes—what ages they seemed to the white-faced, overstrung woman!—there was a faint movement in the hitherto lifeless body, a painful shudder quivered in every limb, and slowly the white lids lifted and the beautiful eyes gazed forth vaguely, wonderingly. Then the white lips opened with a shuddering sigh and the words:

"Where—where am I? My head, my head! What—what—is this?" came painfully, almost inaudibly.

Mrs. Froyte drew a lace shawl over Kyra's eyes.

"Hush! Hush, dear!" she whispered, with a terrified glance round her, lest the whisper, low as it was, should be heard. "It is I! You—you are all right. You are in bed. Let me help you— No, no! Don't take the shawl from your eyes. Give me your hand. That's right! Hush, hush! Lean on me. I—I want to take you to my room. Hush, hush! don't speak a word—not a word! You will not! Promise me! Lean your face against my bosom!"

With infinite care, with a skill that was something marvellous, she got Kyra out of the ghastly house of death, and, still keeping her blindfolded, led her out, across the passage, and into her own room.

CHAPTER XXVII.

KYRA struggled gently and involuntarily with the shawl that enveloped her head.

"What is the matter, what has happened? Why do you blindfold me—I cannot see?" she asked in a whisper: her voice was still weak and she was rather alarmed by Mrs. Froyte's strange conduct.

Mrs. Froyte had locked the door, and, on her knees, was undressing Kyra and exchanging the mortuary clothes for ordinary ones; and she wrapped a dressing-gown round Kyra before she removed the shawl from her head. As she did so, Kyra uttered a faint cry of surprise and anxiety at the sight of Mrs. Froyte's worn and haggard face.

"Oh, you are ill!" she murmured, pityingly. "You have been ill! And yet—I don't remember—I—" She put her hand to her forehead and looked round vaguely and perplexedly. "Have I—have I been in one of my trances? I feel confused and as if I had forgotten everything. Ah! I remember: this house! I am still a prisoner! My head aches so badly that I can't think! But how ill you look, Mrs. Froyte! What is it? Has—has anything happened—anything dreadful? Has Stracey—"

All this was in a whisper and to a running accompaniment of "Hushes!" from Mrs. Froyte. Terrible though the work of the last few days had been, a still more trying task lay before her; and only a woman of her stubborn, indomitable courage could have faced it.

"Hush, dear!" she whispered, close to Kyra's ear. "You must not talk. Listen, Kyra, and don't speak. Whatever you hear me say, however strange and—and terrible it may sound, do not cry out, do not scream."

Her thin hand closed on the girl's—now warm and living—and gripped it almost fiercely, and she fixed her eyes on Kyra's, in which a vague fear was beginning to dawn.

"Kyra, there is a chance of escape—no, no; do not speak—something—something has happened to help us. I will tell you presently. Hush, listen!" She crept to the door and listened, then stole back and held Kyra's arm again. "I want you to lie down and rest. If—if anyone, if Mrs. Lambert comes to the door and calls to—to me, do not answer! On your life, don't answer! I do not think she will come—she has gone to bed—but if she should, remain silent as death." She shuddered involuntarily at the word: it was so appropriate. "I have something to do—I shall not be long, and when I come back I will tell you of the plan I have formed, the chance of escape."

Kyra signed acquiescence and lay down on the bed, and Mrs. Froyte, locking her in, stole to Mrs. Lambert's room. It was at the end of a passage and some distance from the rooms occupied by the other two women, and Mrs. Froyte having listened until she heard the sleeping nurse's regular *breathing*, inserted a small wedge of wood under the door so

that it could not be opened from the inside. Then she went down to a distant part of the garden where some former tenant had made a rough kind of rockery of big limestones.

With infinite labour, with the calm and dogged patience and persistence she had displayed all through the execution of her scheme, she carried up a number of the stones and placed them in the coffin, packing them carefully with articles of clothing; then she screwed down the lid, and, still as noiseless as a shadow, glided back to Kyra. Kyra turned to her eagerly and would have risen, but Mrs. Froyte sat on the bed and restrained her.

"No, no, lie still; don't move! You must not make a sound, or she will hear you, and all my plans will be ruined. At present she is asleep, but she may wake at any moment, and the greatest caution is necessary."

Kyra nodded eagerly and signed to her to go on. Mrs. Froyte moistened her lips and covertly wiped the perspiration from her face; for the labour had nearly exhausted her: and there was still so much to do, so much danger and peril to face.

"Kyra, there is something I have done, something desperate and—and terrible. God knows whether I have done right—no, it is not right—I do not know whether you will approve; you may condemn me, blame me, perhaps denounce me. But I was tempted—there seemed no other way—and it cannot be undone! It is too late even for reproaches, even if you have them for me."

While she was speaking in the lowest of whispers, she was listening, her face white and strained; and Kyra watched her with a quivering dread.

"You were in Stracey's power; you know what he is; you yourself told me how hopeless it was to attempt to escape from him; you said that you would rather die than marry him—"

Kyra made an earnest gesture of assent.

—"And you were right; he would have kept you here until death indeed came to your relief, for I could not help you openly. His father is my husband—"

Kyra moved her hand and nodded again in assent; and Mrs. Froyte, after a pause, during which she bit at her white lips as if she were nerving herself for the revelation, went on, almost inaudibly:

"Then you fell ill. You remember that? Do—do you remember the medicine?"

Kyra nodded with a puzzled air.

"Stracey had given it to the nurse to give to you. He—he"—her voice grew husky—"he had changed the directions on the label, had doubled the dose. You remember how particularly Doctor Graham cautioned—"

Kyra shut her lips tightly to keep back the threatened cry, and shuddered; then she sighed as if she almost regretted that Stracey's murderous plot had been thwarted.

"Fortunately I was here and saved you," said Mrs. Froyte. "I tell you of it because I want you to know how hard I was driven, how sorely I was tempted. Now, hold my hand—tightly, tightly. And do not cry out, do not speak even! You fell into one of your trances—you remember? It was a very bad one, a deeper one than I have ever seen you in before. You looked exactly as if—as if you were dead."

She paused and fixed her eyes on Kyra, as if compelling her to silence and calm.

"I am going to tell you, to explain. You were just like one dead; so like, that the woman, when I called to her and she came into the room, thought you were dead. She went for the doctor, and he, too—he had been drinking—took you for dead. Hush! not a word! Then I was tempted to carry out the idea that had sprung into my head—God knows how—when I came into the room and found you in the trance. If they, two experienced persons—well, no, the boy was not; it was easy to deceive him—but if the nurse was mistaken, and thought you really dead, why—why should I undeceive them, why shouldn't I pretend that I thought so, too?"

Kyra's grip tightened on the worn hand and her eyes began to dilate; but she shut her teeth hard and signed to Mrs. Froyte to go on.

"It was a terrible chance. I was running the risk of—I don't know what they would do to me if it were found out—it was almost an impossible thing to carry out; but—I risked it. I—Kyra, you are a woman, not a weak, brainless girl; you will be brave? Think of all I have gone through; it will help you to bear the shock, give you strength to help me to carry it through to the end and save you; let them treat you as if you were dead. In that other room—the room from which I have just brought you—"

"Yes, yes! Why—why did you blindfold me?" Kyra whispered, shudderingly, close to Mrs. Froyte's ear.

Mrs. Froyte set her lips firmly.

"So that—that you might not see the coffin," she said. "*Hush! Hush! Not a word! Your safety—my safety depends on it!*"

Kyra fell back, with her face covered with her hands, to the pillow, and Mrs. Froyte bent over her and whispered in her ear:

"In the eyes of the law, Kyra, you *are* dead! As dead as if you were already buried. The doctor gave the certificate. Ah, I can spare you nothing, for you *must* be told, must understand exactly *how* the thing has been done, and how you are placed in the future. To-morrow the funeral will take place—Kyra Jermyn will have passed out of the world—that is, if you will consent to carry out my plan, to finish it. You may refuse, denounce me—I do not know. It is for you to decide, for you only."

She shrugged her shoulders with a gesture of stolid resignation, almost of weary indifference.

"But you must decide quickly. There is no time to lose, not a moment—if you intend to finish what I have begun and carried through so far, and escape. Wait! Count the cost well. If you decide to carry out the plan, you must accept the fact that—that you are dead. You must realise that you are already beginning a new life. Kyra Jermyn will have passed away forever: there will be no coming back, remember. The thing has—by luck, chance, call it what you will—worked so well, that there is no chance of undoing it—while you remain silent. And to speak, to reveal the secret in the future would bring down punishment on my head as well as Stracey's and my husband's. You must decide *now* and *once for all*!"

There was a pause, then she whispered:

"You said you would rather die than marry Stracey—well, you have died! You will remain as one dead, unless you choose to denounce me. Wait a moment longer. In case you should resolve to uphold what I have done, I have thought of the future. I have some money—money of my own, that I have saved; and there are your jewels. Some of them are extremely valuable; with them and the money you would have enough to start in life—to live for some time on the Continent. You envied the factory girls the other day; you wanted to work, to do something in the world: here is your chance, if you decide to remain dead—to relinquish your identity. I won't say a word to bias you; I am indifferent; yes, I am so weary and worn in body and spirit that I do not care what becomes of me. But I will save my husband if I can. I will not help you to escape—as Kyra Jermyn." Her voice grew hard and cold. "He is my husband, and I still love him: he—he is weak and unable to resist temptation, but he is not

wholly bad, and but for Stracey— But, bad or not, he is my husband, and I have to protect him. Hush!”

She glided to the door and listened. When she came back, Kyra had risen and was sitting on the side of the bed. She was white to the lips, and her lovely eyes were dilated as if she were fighting against a nameless terror; but her brows were set, and there was an expression of resolution on her lips. She extended her hand to Mrs. Froyte and drew her to her side, gazing at her intently.

“I have decided,” she said, in Mrs. Froyte’s ear. “You are the bravest woman in the whole world. To save me you have done”—a shudder shook her—“you have risked—ah, what have you not risked! What have you not undergone! I cannot realise it yet; and yet—yet I can; oh, I can! It is horrible, horrible! And do you think I am not grateful? If I had been your daughter, you could not have done more for me—have borne more! Yes, I have decided. I—I will finish what you have begun. I will be—dead to everyone, to the whole world. There is no longer a Kyra Jermyn—”

She stopped suddenly, and the colour rose to her white face. There had been no Kyra Jermyn since a certain ceremony in a gloomy church at Benstead! She sat, with her face in her hands, thinking for awhile. She would never see Lance le Breton, her husband, again: never, never! He, with the others, would think her dead. Would he be sorry, or—or relieved? There flashed across her mind the strange expression on his face when they were parting, when he had asked her to let him kiss her. But, yes, surely he would be relieved. She was nothing but an incubus, the memory of an incubus; he had done a chivalrous, but a foolish, thing in marrying her; he had bound himself, for the sake of a promise given to a girl in distress—almost wrung from him, she thought, with a hot flush of shame—but her death would set him free. She drew a deep sigh. Somehow, for some strange, indefinable reason, the thought made her sad, even in this moment of the prospect of escape.

Mrs. Froyte had stolen to the door again to listen. She came back and regarded Kyra with cold alertness.

“That is your decision. Very good. There is no time to lose. This is what I have planned out—you may think of something better; you are more clever than I am: you must leave here to-night. You know the place?”

Kyra shook her head.

“No, not even its name, or whereabouts it is,” she whis-

pered. "Stracey was so cunning—ah, but we will not speak of him! Forgive me."

Mrs. Froyte did not move, but said, with her old impassiveness:

"It is called Heydon. It is a small, desolate place in the marshes; there are very few houses, and everyone is known to his neighbour. You must not start from this station. There is a large one in a manufacturing town, about four miles away. You keep the high-road— Ah! what is that?" she broke off, as she heard a footstep in the passage.

Kyra started, and the two women clung to each other in silent terror as they heard a knock on the door; and Mrs. Froyte clapped her hand on Kyra's mouth.

"Are you there, Mrs. Froyte?" asked Mrs. Lambert's voice.

Mrs. Froyte remained silent for a moment, then she replied calmly, though Kyra felt the hand on her lips tremble:

"Yes. What is it?"

"Let me come in," said Mrs. Lambert, in a frightened voice. "There's—there's strange noises in the house."

Mrs. Froyte quietly thrust Kyra behind the bed curtains, and going to the door, opened it a few inches.

"I have come for a drink of water," she said, "and am just going back. What is the matter? What has frightened you?"

Mrs. Lambert shuddered.

"Oh, I scarcely know! I suppose I must have been dreaming; but I fancied I heard footsteps—soft kind of footsteps going up and down the stairs, and in that—the room."

"Yes; you have been dreaming," said Mrs. Froyte, with a calmness which amazed Kyra, who was clutching the curtains for support. "I'll give you a little brandy. Wait there."

She got some brandy and took it out to the shivering woman.

"This house and—everything's getting on my nerves," said Mrs. Lambert, in a low voice, and half apologetically. "It's all been so sudden; and the lying there and thinking that that dear, sweet, beautiful girl lies in her coffin—" The glass shook in her hand, and she gulped down the remander of the brandy. "Are you going back there? Well, I'd offer to go, but I can't. I'm all of a-shiver. And I thought I should have screamed out just now, for I couldn't get my door open for some time; it had got stuck with a piece of wood or something. Of course I was only dreaming; but it

was so life-like that I could have sworn that I heard footsteps—like someone walking in their stockings—on the stairs and in the room. I'll go back now: I wish it was morning. It's dreadful, only us two women in the house! Are you sure you wouldn't like me to sit up with you?"

"Quite sure," replied Mrs. Froyte. "You go back and try and go to sleep; but if you can't, don't be nervous if you hear footsteps, for this time they'll be real. I shall be about, making a cup of tea. I'll bring you some later on."

Mrs. Lambert thanked her and went back to her room, and Mrs. Froyte hastened to the almost fainting Kyra.

"You'd better have some brandy, too," she whispered; but Kyra put the glass from her.

Mrs. Froyte's courage made her feel ashamed.

"No, no," she said. "I do not want it. I—am all right, and not afraid now. Do you think she will go to sleep? If she should not—"

"In any case you must go, and before it gets light. Wait here. You must not lock the door, for she may hear you. Get behind the curtain again if you hear her coming: you know my step?"

Kyra nodded and Mrs. Froyte left the room, quietly but not noiselessly. She returned presently, after an interval that seemed terribly long to Kyra, with a plain serge dress and some equally sober out-of-door things, and silently helped Kyra to put them on; but not until she had sewn the most valuable of the jewels—Stracey's bracelet, strange irony of fate! was amongst them—into the bodice; the remainder she made up with a small parcel which she placed in the skirt pocket.

"You cannot take a thing with you that you cannot get into this," she said, indicating a small brown bag. "But it will not matter. You can buy what you want. Here is the money—put it away safely. Now you must go. I will go down and open the door—I oiled the lock and the bolts yesterday, and they will make no noise; but close the door carefully and quietly. God keep you and watch over you, Kyra. I can do no more for you."

Kyra put her arms round her neck, and whispered brokenly her gratitude; but Mrs. Froyte was no more responsive than usual; and after a moment unwound the arms and put them from her.

"Go now," she said. "It was a bad day for you, for James, for all of us, when you came to us. I pray that we may never meet again."

"You will not know what becomes of me—I cannot let you know?" said Kyra, fighting with her tears; for though Mrs. Froyte would have none of her love, Kyra felt the parting—and under such circumstances—acutely.

Mrs. Froyte shook her head.

"No. And I do not want to hear. I want to forget, forget. Hush! Come now."

They stole to the door and inch by inch down the passage and stairs, each holding their breath, and going with fixed gaze like one treading a narrow path on a precipice. Mrs. Froyte opened the door, the key and bars moving noiselessly; and Kyra, with a gesture of farewell, was passing out, when she stopped suddenly.

"My purse!" she whispered. "I have left it on the bed!"

Mrs. Froyte frowned and shrugged her shoulders impatiently, and turned to retrace her steps; but Kyra caught her arm.

"I will go," she whispered, and, before Mrs. Froyte could stop her, she went quickly but noiselessly up the stairs. She got the purse and was coming down again, when a thrill of terror ran through her and brought her to a stop. She had heard Mrs. Lambert's door open. The next moment a white-clad figure came rushing down the passage, calling:

"Mrs. Froyte! Mrs. Froyte!"

Mrs. Froyte and Kyra turned as if turned to stone, gazing at each other in the agony of suspense, then Mrs. Froyte called back:

"Well?"

"There's—there's someone moving about!" came the shuddering voice.

"Yes; it's I."

"No, no; someone, something besides you. I heard you down here and then the noise of soft footsteps—" She broke off abruptly, for she had come to the head of the stairs and her distended eyes, almost starting from her head, were fixed upon Kyra; and suddenly the brooding quiet of the house was rent by her scream.

"Look, look! She's there—there on the stairs!" she shrieked, pointing at Kyra.

Mrs. Froyte looked at the spot indicated by the woman's shaking finger.

"Where?" she said, calmly, soothingly. "I don't see any-one, anything. What is it?"

"It's her! Miss Jermyn!" gasped the terror-stricken

woman. "I can see her quite plainly. It's her ghost—her ghost! Ah! She's looking at me!"

She gave a great sob of horror and terror, and clung to the balusters, her starting eyes still fixed on Kyra.

"There is no one there," said Mrs. Froyte, in the same tone, half impatient, half soothing. "You've been dreaming; you've had the nightmare. I can see nothing!"

Unable to remain motionless any longer, Kyra moved slightly. Again the silent house was rent by an awful scream, and, throwing up her arms wildly, Mrs. Lambert fell to the ground in a swoon. Mrs. Froyte opened the front door and beckoned to Kyra.

"Quick! Quick for your life!" she panted, and with one noiseless bound Kyra reached the hall and passed out into the darkness.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE darkness into which Kyra had gone passed at last, and the dawn broke. Mrs. Lambert, who had refused to return to her bed, sat over the kitchen fire, shivering as if she were cold. She crouched in a silence broken now and again by a kind of shivering moan. Mrs. Froyte had made some tea, and had almost forced the woman to take some. It seemed as if she had very nearly collapsed under the shock and the fainting-fit that had followed, and when she took her eyes from the fire it was to glance round fearfully, as if she were afraid that she should again see the vision which had appeared on the stairs.

"You won't mind if I go directly after the funeral, Mrs. Froyte?" she asked, in a shaky voice. "You won't stay, I suppose? I shouldn't, if I were you. It isn't a fit place." She looked round as if she were listening. "I couldn't stop if you wanted me ever so badly, I couldn't, indeed! I don't know what's come to me; I was never taken like it before, and I've had most serious and painful cases. I suppose it was the shock of her dying so suddenly. You see, I'd got fond of her; no one could help it; she was such a gentle, sweet-tempered young lady; so patient and pleasant-spoken and grateful." She broke down for a moment and cried in a fretful, overwrought fashion. "And when I saw her standing there looking up at me—"

"When you fancied you saw her, you mean," said Mrs. Froyte, coldly.

"Yes, of course it was only fancy," admitted Mrs. Lam-

bert; "but no fancy was ever more real-like. I shall never laugh at them spiritualists again." She shuddered; then she said, peevishly: "Isn't there anyone coming to the funeral: surely there must be some relatives, someone besides us two and that doctor-boy!"

"I've wired for my husband," said Mrs. Froyte. "He will be here this morning. You can go directly after the funeral; and I am not surprised that you should want to do so. You are suffering from nervous prostration, and, if I were you, I should take a rest, go somewhere for a change, and try to forget—"

Mrs. Lambert shivered.

"That's easier said than done," she said, moodily. "People don't so soon forget when they've seen what I saw. I only hope and trust I sha'n't be haunted by the poor young thing! At any rate, I know we did everything that could be done for her; that's one comfort. I don't know what Mr. Stracey will say when he hears of it!"

James Froyte arrived a little before noon. His puffy face was white and there were dark shadows under his eyes, and for several moments he stood in the room with downcast eyes, as if he were afraid of meeting the sombre ones of his wife.

"This is awful," he said at last, huskily. "I can't believe, realise it. What was she doing here? Why didn't you let me know you were here with her? You told me you were with your cousin Jane—why didn't you write or telegraph when—when she was ill?"

Mrs. Froyte eyed him with grim irony.

"You'd better ask Stracey why she was here. He brought her: she was ill and wanted a change and rest, he said. I followed him here one day, unknown to him. She died very suddenly. You will know as well as I why I did not write to you. But ask Stracey."

"Where is he?" he enquired, sinking into a chair and clutching its arms as he clutched the arms of his own chair at home.

Mrs. Froyte shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't know. Abroad, he said, didn't he?"

"It—it will be a terrible shock for him," he muttered, with a swift and furtive upward glance at her.

"Will it?" she retorted, with grim impassiveness. "Stracey is not easily shocked. Did you see Doctor Graham, by any chance, before you started; did you tell him?"

He shook his head.

"No; I saw no one; besides, what—what would have been the good? It was too late."

"Yes," she said, as impassively as before. "It would have been too late. I will get you something to eat, James."

"No, no—give me some whiskey, brandy, something to drink; nothing to eat." He looked from the window and shuddered. "What an awful place! I don't understand why Stracey brought her here—Mrs. Malcolm—"

"You'd better ask him," she said again; then she paused as she left the room and looked intently at him over her shoulder. "No; better not, perhaps. No, I should ask Stracey nothing."

When the funeral was over and they returned to the house, and the young doctor, after consuming with covert eagerness the usual cold meats and sherry, had taken his departure, Mrs. Lambert announced her intention of leaving.

"I'm very sorry, sir," she said, with an air of gloomy resolution, "but I couldn't stay another night in this place if one were to offer me a hundred pounds. I start at every sound, and my head— Ah!" She broke off with something like a shriek. "What's that? See there, now, how bad I am! It's only a knock at the door!"

She went to open it and uttered another faint scream; for Stracey stood on the step.

"How do you do, Mrs. Lambert?" he said, in his suave, bland voice. "I'm afraid I startled you."

The husband and wife exchanged glances as they heard his voice, and James Froyte half rose from his chair, but sat down again, breathing heavily; but Mrs. Froyte stood in the centre of the room, calm and self-possessed. Mrs. Lambert had burst into tears, and, asking her what was the matter, Stracey passed her and entered the dining-room.

He started at sight of the two awaiting him, and his dark eyes flashed round the room as if in search of another person.

"Father! Mother!" he exclaimed. "What—" Then he noticed their pallor and their black clothes and his face went almost as white as their own. "What is the matter, why are you here? How—" he demanded. "What is the matter with the woman?"

James Froyte moistened his lips but seemed to find speech impossible, and Mrs. Froyte went and silently closed the door.

"Where have you been, Stracey?" she asked.

There was a new note in her voice, and he was quick to notice it; and he glanced at her sharply and suspiciously as *he answered*:

"Abroad, I have only just returned. Where—where is Kyra?"

"Kyra is dead," replied Mrs. Froyte, impassively.

He stood for a moment as if he had not heard her, then his hand stole out to the table and he clutched it, and, standing speechlessly, looked from one to the other with a strange expression on his face, as if the shock were tempered by a sinister satisfaction and still more sinister triumph.

"Dead! Kyra dead!" he said, thickly. "It isn't true, it can't be true!"

James Froyte shot a glance at him, then stared at the carpet, and Mrs. Froyte answered, with downcast eyes:

"It is true. No wonder you are surprised." His eyelids quivered, but he did not raise them. "She died quite suddenly; was ill only a few days."

"What was it?" he asked, almost inaudibly.

She was silent for a moment, then she replied, slowly:

"Failure of the heart."

"The certificate says that—there was a certificate?" he asked, sharply, almost involuntarily.

"Yes: she could not have been buried without it, could she?"

"Buried! Then she is buried?" He drew a long breath and sank into a chair, holding the table until he had got his seat. "When?"

"This morning. You came just too late. We could not let you know; we did not know where you were."

He was silent while one could count twenty, then he said, almost inaudibly:

"Kyra dead—and buried! My God, I cannot realise it! Was she conscious—the doctor—you were here then—when she died?"

He did not ask her how she came to be there, but took it for granted, with his usual *sang-froid*, that she had followed him.

Mrs. Froyte inclined her head.

"Yes. And the doctor. She had been ill for a few days, and he was in attendance."

He drew another long breath of relief, satisfaction.

"I am—glad," he said. "It was fortunate you were here—"

"Why did you bring her here?" James Froyte asked, fearfully and hoarsely.

Stracey shot a glance at his white, puffy face.

"Mrs. Malcolm and she did not take to each other. I brought

her here for a few days' rest and quiet, for the change. There is no need to go over it all; it is too painful—for all of us."

Mrs. Lambert knocked at the door. She had her outdoor things on.

"I'm going, sir—ma'am," she said, rather shamefacedly.

Mrs. Froyte did not attempt to stay her, but shook hands, and Stracey followed her into the passage.

"This is a terrible business—so sudden! My poor girl!" He put his hands to his eyes and turned away, and Mrs. Lambert began to whimper. "It must have been a—fearful shock for you! As for me—and my poor people—" His voice choked; but he seemed to master his emotion by a great effort. "You must let me know how much I am indebted to you, Mrs. Lambert. I am fully sensible that no money can repay your kindness and care—"

Mrs. Lambert broke down.

"I got so fond of her!" she said, struggling with her sobs. "The death was bad enough, coming so sudden; but what happened to me afterwards was worse—"

"Happened afterwards?" he asked, sharply. "What do you mean?"

Mrs. Lambert shook her head.

"Of course, it was only my fancy, sir; my nerves must have been overwrought and given way—me, as has never broken down before, and ever so much worse cases!—but, I see the poor, dear young lady, that is, her ghost—" Stracey stared at her, then his lips curved with a swiftly passing smile and sneer of contempt. "Of course, it was only fancy, but the shock— But, there, sir; I don't want to harrow up your feelings; you must be suffering quite enough without that— It's a little over ten pounds, sir," she added, as Stracey took out his purse.

He pressed two ten-pound notes into her hand: he was in the mood to give her five times the amount, but he was too cautious to do so.

"Please accept that, Mrs. Lambert," he said. "I need not say that if ever we require a devoted, trustworthy nurse, I shall remember and send for you."

James Froyte had left the dining-room, and Stracey, when he returned, found Mrs. Froyte alone and standing where he had left her. She held something in her hand behind her back.

"I suppose we can leave here at once?" she said, coldly.

He nodded absently, and, going to the sideboard, got a glass, and took some brandy from the decanter on the table.

"Yes," he said; "to-morrow. There is no need to stay. We will return to the Elms—for a time. Tell me something more, some particulars."

"There is very little to tell," she said in her toneless voice. "She died suddenly, without pain. The doctor did all he could, and we gave her—the nurse gave her—Doctor Graham's medicine—"

He had the glass half raised to his lips, and he arrested it and looked over it at her.

"Doctor Graham's medicine?" he said, in a voice as toneless as her own.

"Yes; you gave it to Mrs. Lambert, you remember."

"Ah, yes," he assented, as if he had suddenly recollected.

"And it was of no use?"

"No; none," she replied.

Then she brought the bottle from behind her quickly and held it out to him, her eyes fixed on his with a regard as keen as steel, as cold as ice.

"Here is the bottle: I have saved it: I thought—you would like to have it."

He drank some of the brandy, his eyes meeting hers steadily, almost defiantly; and they stood regarding each other thus like duellists waiting for the thrust, for a full minute; then he took the bottle from her, and said:

"You did right, *quite* right. It was thoughtful of you. I should like to keep it as a memento of our poor, dear girl."

Her eyes fell, a sharp shudder swept over her, and she was turning to leave the room, when James Froyte came in.

"This—this is an awful place, Stracey!" he said. "I could not stay here; it—it would drive me mad."

Stracey's eyes flashed from one to the other.

"We will go to-morrow," he said. "There is no need for us to stay, as I have just been saying. You will like to return to the Elms for a time—or would you rather go abroad for awhile? My mother would prefer that, no doubt; she must need a change after this terrible business. Yes; better travel before you settle down. You will want to look about you for a new place, for some place suited to your requirements and—er—position."

They stood with downcast eyes, and he regarded them with a half-contemptuous, half-sinister smile.

"Poor Kyra's death has caused a change in your circumstances, you know. Ah, yes; no doubt you had forgotten it; it is only natural; it is hard to think of anything but our

great loss. Poor Kyra; poor, poor girl! None of us little thought that she would not be spared to enjoy her father's great wealth, that she would be cut off in the flower of her youth, and that—she was not married, you know—the money would come to us."

James Froyte uttered a faint cry, and, gripping the back of a chair, stared with ashen face and starting eyes at his son's face.

"Stracey!" he gasped, hoarsely. "No, no! I won't, I won't have it; I won't touch a penny! No, no! By God, I won't! You—you may do as you like, but neither me nor your mother will take it—"

Stracey's face flushed darkly and he scowled at the pair.

"Better persuade my father to lie down and take some rest," he said between his clenched teeth. "He is upset—little wonder—persuade him to lie down and remain quite quiet for a time. He is talking wildly and foolishly, as he will see when he is calmer and has recovered from the shock. I myself am very much upset and scarcely know where I am or what I am doing. And there is much to be done, much. If you will give me some writing-materials I will make out the announcement of her death for the papers."

"Go upstairs," Mrs. Froyte said in an under-tone to her husband. When he had gone she placed pen, ink, and paper on the table and followed him.

Stracey sat down and drew them towards him; but his eyes wandered to the medicine-bottle on the table as if he were fascinated by it. He stared at it fixedly, defiantly, for a moment; then he got up, and, throwing it on the fire, beat it with the poker until it was smashed into small fragments which fell amongst the burning coals.

"She knows!" he muttered as he stirred the fire. "Yes, she knows. But she will not speak, and there is no one else who can. There is the certificate, the nurse's evidence, if it were called for. What was this foolish ghost-story of hers, I wonder? Everything was regular, everything shall be carried out as regularly."

He went back to the table, and took up the pen again; but his brain was too crowded with thoughts to permit him to write, and he sat and stared before him vacantly, his lips twitching with a sardonic smile.

"Yes, luck has been with us all the time! Kyra gone: out of my way, clean out of my way: and the money ours!" He sucked in a long breath. "Rich! really rich! Heaven and earth, I can scarcely realise it! Rich! Young, and with all

the world before me! What luck, what luck! How hot the room is!"

He glanced round and wiped his brow, and rose absently and went out along the passage and into the garden. The dog, hearing his footsteps, rushed out of the kennel, and straining at his chain, barked furiously at him. Stracey stood just out of reach and smiled down at him.

"You beast!" he murmured, blandly. "You'd like to get at me, wouldn't you? You were fond of her, and you hate me, don't you? Quiet, you beast! Lie down, or I'll—"

The dog leapt and strained, barking himself hoarse, his eyes blood-shot with his fury. Stracey turned round, and walking to the mound of stones, picked up one, and—smiling and murmuring softly still—threw it with all his force at the dog. He struck the poor, faithful beast on its leg, and it staggered and fell; but it rose, holding up the injured limb, and hurled itself furiously, to the extent of the chain, howling with pain and rage.

"Broken, I should think," said Stracey, softly. "Anyway, you've got something to remember me by, my friend!"

He turned and went back to the house, and, sitting down at the table, drew up the announcement:

"On the 22nd instant, at Heydon, Essex, Kyra, the daughter of Horace Montague Jermyn, Esq., aged twenty-two. Friends in India, please note."

And it was this announcement that Lance le Breton read just as he was starting for England in search of her.

Kyra—his wife—was dead!

CHAPTER XXIX.

KYRA walked quickly through the darkness and along the high-road, the electric sense of freedom predominating for a time over every other emotion; but after awhile, as she neared the town from which she was to take the train, she began to realise, or partially to realise, something of the comi-tragedy into which her life had been impelled.

She was dead to the world—to Lance le Breton—and another and a quite different individuality, so far as the world and Lance le Breton were concerned, was hastening along the flat Essex road. To a certain extent the reflection was not displeasing, the strange isolation not without compensation. Since her father's death she had been held in bond-

age, so to speak, by the Froytes, and of late had actually been a prisoner; from this time forth she was free to go whither she would, to do whatsoever she choose.

But the difficulty lay in the choosing! All the world stretched before her, she had only to make a place for herself in it. Long before she reached the town she began to feel hungry; and it was with the most profound satisfaction that she came upon a dairy which had opened early to accommodate the men and women who travelled to their daily toil in London by the early train. She got a glass of milk—still warm from the cow—and a roll and butter, and, feeling refreshed and encouraged, made her way to the station.

A workman's train was almost due, and Kyra was plunged into a scene which, ordinary enough to the habitual actors in it, filled her with amazement; for she found the platform crowded by men, women, boys and girls—the latter forming a large majority—waiting for the arrival of the quite inadequate train. Some of them were munching the remains of their breakfast, most of them were laughing and chaffing, and all of them were talking in the high, shrill key peculiar to the Cockney. When the train came up there was a rush for the carriages, which were instantly packed to overflowing by the pushing, struggling mass. Some of the girls shrieked, the men swore, the boys yelled. It was a pandemonium which would have startled a missionary in a heathen land, but which the railway officials regarded with a serene and undisturbed equanimity. There is a Board of Trade—I believe a special board—which is supposed to regulate all railway matters; but probably it is asleep, like so many other boards, and wots nothing of the disgraceful overcrowding of the early morning trains which are run for "the benefit" of the working-man who, compelled to live out of London by the dearness of rent, and the lack of house room, has to fight—and not only he, but his daughters—like a wild beast, for mere standing room in a carriage licensed to hold ten and packed with twice the number.

Kyra, unused to a crowd of any kind, and still more unused to fighting, would inevitably have been left behind, if a good-natured girl, observing her distress and dismay, had not seized her by the arm, and, pushing and elbowing like an Amazon, dragged her into a carriage.

"Shameful, ain't it?" panted the girl who had befriended her, as Kyra still nervously clung to her arm with one hand while she attempted to set her hat straight with the other. "*I declare as I gets to town quite worn out with the scrim-*

mage, to say nothing of the wear and tear of yer clothes! I hope you ain't 'urt—miss?"

She added the "miss" after a comprehensive glance at Kyra, which impressed her with a sense of Kyra's superiority to the rest of the passengers.

"No; not at all—thanks to you," said Kyra. "Why is the train so crowded, and where are they all going?"

"It's like this every mornin'," replied the girl; "and we're going to London, of course, to work. Ain't you? I thought you was in one of the swell shops, one of the West End linen-drappers; one of them young ladies as wears satin gowns and tries on things."

Kyra shook her head and coloured a little.

"No; but I am going to London, and to work, I hope; though I don't yet know what kind of work."

"Don't you reely, now?" commented the girl, with surprise and curiosity in her tone and eyes. "That's funny! And this is your first workman's train? Well, I hope it will be your last. Here! don't shove so, Emma Jones; d'ye think I'm made of wood?"

"I can't 'elp it," replied Emma, "I'm bein' shoved myself, ain't I? You want a fust-class kerridge all to yourself, you do!"

"And all of you, all these girls, are going to work?" said Kyra, wonderingly.

The scene, the movements and talk of the crowd were acting as a very salutary tonic, and it was impossible to brood over her own fate in the midst of these restless beings, all a-quiver with vitality and eagerness.

"Yes; some of us is employed in warehouses—packing, and invoicing, and so on; some of us is in printing-offices and at the book-binding; some of us is type-writing and office clerks—that girl's in the post-office; she's hawful clever, she is—some of us sewing-machine and collar-hands. Oh, there's all sorts goes by the workman's trains. As to them, the men, they're everythin' you can think of. You see, there ain't no room in London, and the rent is drefful high in consequence of their pullin' down all the poor kind of 'ouses and buildin' up tenements that don't 'old 'alf the people the others did. So we live out o' town, like bloomin' swells, only with a difference. Now, what are you goin' in for, if I might hask, miss?"

"I don't know," said Kyra, rather absently.

The girl stared at her, and after another request that Emma Jones would cease from shoving, said reflectingly:

"Well, it is funny! You're a swell, ain't you, miss? Lor' bless you! I can tell in a minnit. I go as far as the park sometimes, and into the West End to look at the shops, and I see your sort up there by the dozens."

Kyra smiled.

"I am not a 'swell,'" she said. "I am poor and looking for work; and I should be grateful to anyone who would advise me—"

"Oh, there's plenty who'll advise you," said the girl, with a laugh. "Advice is the cheapest thing in the market. When you say you're poor, you don't mean that you haven't any 'oof—money I mean? Fancy your not knowin' what 'oof is—that you're reg'lar 'ard up? No; I thought not. You don't look like it. Why, that 'at o' yours must 'ave cost a couple o' pounds, at the least. Oh, I know. I've seen 'em marked up in the swell milliners. Well, then, you can go to one of the boarding-houses in Bloomsbury or Islington way, while you're looking out for a berth?"

"Boarding-houses?" said Kyra, interrogatively.

"Yes; Lor', you are a hignoramus! Hi, Jimmy, lend us your piper for a minet!"

She called it "piper" in proper Cockney fashion.

Jimmy passed a half-penny paper over the heads of half a dozen persons, and the girl turned the pages until she came to the advertisements.

"'Ere you are! 'Board and residence from twenty-one shillings per week. Bath hot and cold. Select society. No. 31 Danberry Square, Islington.' That's one of 'em: there's a score more; but that one might do for you. Of course you could get plenty cheaper. You can get yourself boarded for sixteen shillings a week, if you want to; but I should say as twenty-one would be nearer the mark for a swell like you. Here, I'll tear the advertisement out. You don't mind, Jimmy?"

"Not me," responded Jimmy, promptly. "When I've seen the latest odds, I've done wiv the bloomin' paper. The noos don't hinterest me, not much!"

"He's in a printing-office, an' 'e knows a lot," whispered Kyra's friend. "'Ere, you put it in your purse. An' if I might hoffer a word of advice, don't you, when you're looking for somethink, go to them registry offices. They're swindles, most of 'em. They'll take a fee from you and promise you all sorts of things; but promises is all you'll get. No, no! What you ought to do is to hadvertise. I suppose you'll want a berth as a governess or a secretary, or somethink 'igh



an' lofty of that kind. It's precious 'ard to get 'old of, I believe—not that I've tried; that's a class above me—but p'r'aps you can afford to wait. If the worst comes to the worst, you can get a berth at a printer's, or learn the book-binding, or perhaps get into one of the ware'ouses. But, Lor', it 'asn't come to that with you! Anyone with 'alf an eye can see as you're a swell, and they'd be glad to get 'old of you. 'Ere's the station where they collect tickets. Get yours ready, for they don't like to be kep' waitin'. They don't mind 'erdin' us like cattle goin' to market, but they're awful shirty if we keep 'em waitin' while they're collectin' the tickets."

She talked in this vein until they arrived at the terminus, where she wished Kyra good-bye and good luck, and was swallowed up in the crowd which poured in turbulent confusion through the exit gate.

Kyra, alone in London—can anyone who has experienced it forget the experience?—made her way out of the station and looked round her, confused and dismayed by the crowd of vehicles and mass of foot-passengers. Fortunately she had the advertisement the friendly, good-natured girl had given her; and when she asked a boyish, red-cheeked policeman how to get to the place named in it, he told her where she must take a 'bus; and she walked through the crowded streets to the spot. Again, the crowd, the noise, the hustle and bustle acted as a tonic. How could one possibly think of one's own trouble when one was surrounded by that human mass of electrified energy and effort?

The conductor put her down at the Angel public-house, which is the great centre, the best-known pub. in the district, and is the pivot round which moves all the life, the business, and the pleasure of the locality.

She had no difficulty in finding Danberry Square; and she was pleasantly surprised by its quietude and Old World air. There were some trees in the square itself, enclosed by iron railings, and the grass was of that deep green peculiar to London: soot is good for grass, and in vividness of colour it would vie with any country meadow. All the houses surrounding the square were alike, as if they had been cut out in a block as they cut veneer; but some were fresher than the others in appearance, and No. 31 was, perhaps, the cleanest and brightest of the lot. A brass plate requested Kyra to ring and knock, and, in response to her summons, a servant—by no means as fresh and clean as the outside of the house—appeared. Kyra entered, and the servant brought Mrs. Mumby, the proprie-

tress. Mrs. Mumly was tall and thin, with a somewhat harassed expression, indicated by a wrinkled forehead and eyebrows perpetually raised almost as high as the roots of the spare, drab-coloured hair, which was brushed off her high forehead as if she had dragged it back in a fit of impatience. She was dressed in black, in that kind of stuff which, though thin, obstinately refuses to "drape," and she wore a mock-cameo brooch as huge as a shield.

In response to Kyra's request for a room, Mrs. Mumly's brows grew still more wrinkled, and her eyebrows grew higher until they threatened to disappear altogether; and, while pretending to reflect, she covertly scanned Kyra in a comprehensive glance which took in every feature and every detail of her dress. Apparently satisfied by her inspection, she said, "Yes," and called for Emmalina—she pronounced it Hemmyleanha—to show Kyra the room.

It was a small room at the top of the house, but it was neat and clean, and Kyra, coming down again, pronounced herself satisfied.

"The breakfast is from eight to half-past nine, lunch is at one, and dinner at seven; or you can 'ave something earlier—say half-past six—if you want to go to the theatre. What name did you say?" asked Mrs. Mumly.

Kyra had not said any name, as Mrs. Mumly was fully aware; and Kyra, not being prepared for the question, was about to give her own name, when she remembered that "Kyra Jermyn" was dead. She naturally hesitated for a moment, and blushed slightly. Then she said, "Mary Burns," simply because it was a name she had chanced to see in the paper in which she had read the advertisement.

Mrs. Mumly noticed the hesitation and remarked:

"In *the* profession, I suppose, Miss Burns?"

"The profession?" asked Kyra, puzzled.

"Yes; an actress."

"Oh, no," Kyra made haste to respond. "I—I have no profession, employment, at present."

Mrs. Mumly looked faintly troubled and doubtful.

"Your luggage is coming on, I suppose?" she suggested.

"No," said Kyra, with the serenity born of ignorance. "I have no luggage at present. I came up to London—unexpectedly, and have to buy what I need."

Mrs. Mumly's expressive countenance displayed still further signs of mental disquietude.

"It's not usual to ask for references," she said, a little nervously, for Kyra looked and spoke like "such a perfect

lady," as Mrs. Mumly often remarked afterwards, that it was difficult, if not impossible, to doubt her respectability; "but, when there's no luggage, and the boarder is not known to us, it is customary to request a reference, or—or a fortnight in advance. It is the regular thing, I assure you, Miss Burns."

Kyra promptly took out her purse and placed a couple of sovereigns on the table, and at the sight of the money and the bulging purse from which it had proceeded, Mrs. Mumly's anxious face instantly cleared and her eyebrows descended to their nominal but still lofty position.

"I'm sure you'll excuse me askin'," she said, apologetically, "but our business is such a risky one and we make such losses if we aren't careful. Only last week a foreign gentleman—a perfect gentleman by the looks of him—went off owing three months' board; and the terms are so low—considering what we do—I really don't think you could find a better table than ours"—Kyra innocently regarded the piece of furniture against which they were standing; it was decidedly shabby and rather rickety—"unless it was thirty or even thirty-five shillings a week—that we can't afford any losses. I hope you'll be comfortable. You'll find our society very select. We did have a harmy major, but he took offence one day—it was because the mutton was boiled instead of roast—and he left in a huff; but we've got a gentleman in a bank, and a couple of ladies in a post-office, and there's old Mr. Sutton; of course he's with us still"—she pronounced the name as if it were quite impossible that Kyra should not know it—"and there's a lady, a widow whose husband used to be at Somerset House. But you'll see 'em all at dinner; and I'm sure you'll soon get on with them and be friendly. Oh, yes, we pride ourselves on being select. This is the drawing-room." She ushered Kyra into a clean but faded-looking room—all the place seemed faded, as if its colours had "gone." "Here's a piano, you see—I hope you play? We often have music in the hevenings. I'll show you the bath—hot and cold—according to the advertisement. And there's the square. The key hangs up behind the front door—please hang it up again after you've used it: keys is so expensive, and we lose so many—the post-office is round the corner, just to your left. St. Humbert's is in the same street. You see we are quite in the centre of everything: and you can get a 'bus for all parts of London; and the tram starts from the Angel. I don't know whether you like any special kind of blacking for your boots: if so, that's a *hextra*.

and afternoon teas are hextra, and, by rights, so should bedroom candles be—they are in most houses—but we give them in. And if you are late at night and there's only your candle on the 'all table"—the passage was about four feet wide—"you'll know you're the last, and are expected to kindly turn out the gas and bolt the door; but I don't suppose you'll often be late. Mr. Wicks, that's the gentleman at the bank, is often very late; but young gentlemen will be young gentlemen, as we know. What time would you like Hemmyleanha to bring your hot water in the morning; and would you care to join our games club? It's a hextra—a shilling a month, for cards and so on. And where would you like to sit? I mean, would you like to be beside a gentleman, or next two ladies: some ladies is perticular where they sit; and I do so like to 'ave everybody comfortable."

Kyra said she would like the hot water at eight; was not at all particular as to the blacking; would be glad to subscribe to the games club; promised Mrs. Mumly that she would, if the last in at night, turn out the gas and bolt the door; and assured her that she did not mind where she sat at table. Then Mrs. Mumly, looking somewhat relieved, allowed Kyra to go up to her room, where she sank into a chair and, so to speak, took breath.

A cracked gong sounded for lunch, and Kyra went down. There were no gentlemen present, and only one lady—the lady whose husband was in Somerset House. She eyed Kyra with covert curiosity, and hoped she was well, then transferred her attention to the cold mutton and kept it there. Mrs. Mumly dispensed small slices of the joint with an air of subdued melancholy—it pervaded all her actions and words at meal times—but made only a few remarks, principally concerning the weather and the price of coals; and Kyra was therefore left free to eat the mutton—wondering why it was so tough and the potatoes so speckly—and map out her plans for the future.

It is difficult to map out a plan without knowing your country, and as Kyra had no conception of where she should first direct her efforts to obtain employment, she asked permission to take the morning paper to her room, and eagerly scanned the advertisements of vacant situations. They were numerous, and somewhat confusing, but she noted those which seemed most suitable to her case, and went out to purchase writing-materials that she might answer some of them.

She found her way to the High Street, and made some

other necessary purchases, and then returned in time for the afternoon tea; which was an "extra." The interval between tea and dinner she spent in the first of the many attacks upon the fortress cylept "Employment," and answered a number of advertisements. She felt full of courage—the sense of freedom was so novel and so sweet!—and she went down to dinner in a frame of mind that is best described by the word "hopeful."

She had bought herself a ready-made dress of black merino; but plain as it was, she could not help looking distinguished; so that her entrance in the dining-room created what the newspapers love to call "a sensation." All the other boarders were already at the table, and every eye turned to scan the new-comer. At the bottom of the hospitable board sat a short, stout man with a red nose and small, watery eyes; he was Mrs. Mumly's husband, and was "something in the city," which in his case meant nothing. He invariably remarked each evening, as he took his place, that he had "had a very 'ard day of it in the city;" from which it may be gathered that sitting on a stool at various bars and consuming strong liquors must be exhausting work. He half rose and opened his mouth and shut it several times, with a quaint mixture of surprise and awe, as Kyra entered; and even Mrs. Mumly, who was absorbed serving a weak but inoffensive liquid, which she called soup, evinced signs of the nervousness and subdued excitement which was shared by all the others of the company, excepting a very small, old gentleman seated exactly opposite Kyra, who only raised his eyes for a moment from his plate to glance at her with a marked lack of interest. The young gentleman from the bank, who was next her, actually dropped his knife and fork in his embarrassment, and the two ladies from the post-office began, after a moment's awed silence, to talk very rapidly and laugh very unnaturally. The widow, having finished her soup, stared at the ceiling as if she were desirous of penetrating to the bedroom above, until a plate of beef was brought her, when she swooped on to it like a bird descending from the clouds; and the other boarders displaying a somewhat like eagerness, Kyra, while the beef was being demolished, was free from observation. The beef, like the mutton at lunch, was decidedly tough, and the plain suet-pudding which, with boiled rice, represented the sweets, was rather too substantial and certainly did not suffer from a superfluity of suet; but Kyra was indifferent to the quality of the food, and, if she had known anything of housekeeping, would have been surprised

that even such plain fare could have been supplied for so small a weekly sum. Coffee was served after dinner, coffee so thick that it might almost have ranked with the food, and the gentlemen having significantly produced cigarettes and pipes, the ladies adjourned to the drawing-room.

Kyra expected and feared that she would be asked some embarrassing questions; but she found that there was no need for any nervousness on that score, for no one asked her anything; indeed, it was not until she was going upstairs for the night that one of the young ladies broke the ice by remarking to her that it was extremely wet for the time of year, to which piece of valuable information Kyra responded with her usual gentleness and friendliness; but something in her tone and the frank, simple dignity of her eyes abashed and discomfited the young lady, who promptly retired to the furthest corner of the drawing-room, and, seizing a book, read it—upside down. Kyra wondered what could be the matter with them: it did not occur to her that they were all frightened of her and shy. None of the gentlemen appeared in the drawing-room; some of them remaining to smoke in the dining-room, the others going out, it is to be presumed in search of amusement. Kyra, as she lay awake thinking of the strange, almost incredibly strange change in her life, heard Mr. Wicks, "the young gentleman in the bank," come in and climb the stairs unsteadily, as if they were a rather difficult mountain.

CHAPTER XXX.

KYRA breakfasted alone with the landlady next morning, for the two Misses Robinson, of the post-office, and Mr. Weeks and Mr. Sutton, had already partaken of that meal and departed for their daily labour, and Mrs. Tonks, the widow, had her tea and egg taken up to her own room: no doubt it was "a hextra;" and Mrs. Mumly, already beginning to look harrassed with the prospect of the day's petty cares and anxieties, confided some of them to Kyra.

"You've no idea how difficult it is to please them all, Miss Bur; now, for instance, there's Mrs. Tonks, she can't bear ; and Mr. Wicks, he's always askin' why we don't have it, as if they've given up killin' calves. And the two Miss Robinsons, they don't like pork, while it's Mrs. Tonks's favourite. And there's onions, too. The two Miss Robinsons won't abide them on the table; they say they're vulgar; and, I don't have 'em with rabbits and shoulder o' mutton, Mrs.

Tonks gets nasty and 'ints about leavin'; and, though she don't pay quite so much as the others, it wouldn't do to lose her, she bein' a permanent. We always reckon on payin' our rent out of the permanents, you see. Of course, I'm not complainin', and I'm sure, if you have any fancies or dislikes, Miss Burns—"

Kyra hastened to assure her that she had not, and Mrs. Mumly heaved a sigh of relief.

"Until you came, old Mr. Sutton was the only one that never complained; he eats everything. In fact, I don't think he knows what he's eatin', and wouldn't be able to tell you whether it was beef, or mutton, or pork. He's a permanent, too; he's a very learned old gentleman. He's in the Ann Teakie line."

"I beg your pardon; the what?" asked Kyra, startled into attention.

"The Ann Teakie. He buys and sells old cameos—like this one on my brooch"—it was a modern of the moderns, one of a kind that Birmingham turns out daily by the hundred gross—"and old coins, and that sort of thing. They say that there isn't anyone who knows more about them than he does. He spends most of his time at the British Museum studying them, and he's got a kind of private shop in the West End; I've heard it's only a room, but that there's hundreds of pounds' worth of medals and carved stones, and such like. He comes out here to board because, he says, it's 'ealthier, bein' 'igher."

"He seemed a very quiet, silent old gentleman," Kyra remarked, for the sake of saying something.

"Oh, dear, yes: he never says anything: you might be here six months before he'd speak to you: and I don't think he hears a word that's said at meals, though he isn't deaf. He's a most satisfactory guest." Mrs. Mumly always called her boarders "guests," or "paying guests." It was more genteel than "boarders."

Kyra looked through the papers and answered some more advertisements, then she went out on a solitary walk. Islington, in the day-time, is a very different place to Islington at night. The streets are not so crowded, and there is no lounging about; every man walks quickly, on business thoughts intent, and the shops have an air of waiting for the evening, which brings the customers. She made some more purchases—they were very modest ones—and wandered about some of the quiet streets, wondering whether any of her letters would bring her satisfactory answers, and when she should begin to "earn her

own living." In the course of her wanderings she came upon an old archway, and, chancing to look through it, was struck by the quaintness and medieval appearance of the little courtyard into which the archway opened. The great elm, in its summer bravery; the carpenter's shop and its heap of white shavings which fell from under the carpenter's plane; the blind basket-maker at work in the sunlight with his dog basking at his feet, the stable-man hissing over the horse he was grooming, attracted her attention; but it was chained, and she was still more delighted, by the pretty, freshly painted little house in the old inn wall, with the thrush singing gaily in his cage by the door, and the cat asleep, with one eye on the sparrows, on the mat. The air of repose, of serenity, soothed her and made her linger. While she stood and gazed, another song arose and joined the thrush's. It was a girl's voice, singing softly, "Aunie Laurie;" and, presently, a slim and pretty girl came out and shook a table-cloth for the benefit of the pigeons which floated down upon the crumbs and right close up to the young girl's feet. It was a charming picture, and Kyra smiled involuntarily in her enjoyment of it. The girl folded the table-cloth, and, throwing it over her arm, came towards the archway and looked up the street eagerly, shading her happy blue eyes with her hand, as if she were expecting some one: Kyra instantly suspected that it was a sweetheart. Whoever it was, he did not appear, and the girl, with a little sigh, was turning away, when one of a herd of bullocks that was being driven down the street charged full into the archway.

The driver shouted a warning, but it was too late, and the animal would have knocked the girl down if Kyra had not caught her by the arm and lugged her out of the way.

Of course the girl screamed, and at the sound the stalwart figure of the carpenter dropped his plane and at a single leap, as it seemed, was at her side. The blind man's dog started for the bullock, the cat fled up the tree, the pigeons fluttered about with whizzing wings, and all was confusion. But in a moment or two the bullock had been headed back into the street by the stable-man, and Kyra heard the carpenter enquire eagerly:

"You aren't hurt, Bessie? I hope you aren't hurt!"

"No, no! It's all right, John," said Bessie, panting a little and laughing, but rather nervously. "The thing startled me so! I declare, it would have been right on my back if it hadn't been for—this young lady." She looked at Kyra with a shy smile of gratitude which changed to one of surprise and

admiration. Ladies of Kyra's type were as rare in Islington as gentlemen of Mr. Black's. "It—it was very kind and brave of her; and I'm sure I'm very grateful. But I'm afraid you must be very frightened, miss. Won't you come in for a little while and—and rest? Do, please!"

Kyra—poor, lonely Kyra—found the invitation, conveyed by the soft voice and the pleasant, shy smile, irresistible, and the two girls went into the little parlour—John Warden being thanked very sweetly by the pretty Bessie, and dismissed.

"Please sit down," she said to Kyra. "You don't feel faint? Will you have a glass of water or—or a little ginger brandy?"

"Oh, no; I'm not at all faint," replied Kyra, laughing softly.

"You must be very brave!" said Bessie, with wide-open eyes. "And you were so sharp, too! I'm sure that if I'd seen it coming I should have screamed and run, and shouldn't have thought of anybody but myself."

"I don't think you would—I mean, run away," said Kyra, with a smile. "What a pretty place this is; with the pigeons and the tree and everything! I was looking at it all; and I'm afraid you must have thought me very rude for staring."

"Oh, no; everybody looks in at White Horse Lane," said Bessie. "Won't you loosen your jacket? Do! That's right!" She blushed at her own eagerness and looked shyly at Kyra's beautiful face. "Do you live near here? Oh, how rude of me!"

"Not at all," said Kyra. "Yes; I am staying at Danberry Square; it is not far from here, I think; I'm not quite sure."

"Then you are strange, you have not been here long?" enquired Bessie, timidly.

"Only one day. And now I will go. Thank you for asking me in to rest. And it is so easy to rest here; it is all so quiet and peaceful; so different to the other streets."

As she rose, Mr. Nolly came into the yard, and Bessie, exclaiming, "Oh, here's father!" ran to meet him.

"Father, there's nearly been an accident!" she said. "I was standing under the archway, looking for Mr. Black, when a mad bull"—the most harmless of bullocks is a "mad bull" to the majority of Londoners—"ran in here and nearly knocked me down. I'm sure I don't know what would have happened if a young lady—this young lady—hadn't caught me by the arm and dragged me out of the way!"

Nolly regarded Kyra gratefully with his one bright eye.

"Very much obliged to you, miss!" he said. "It was a plucky thing to do; and I'm sure Bessie here is very grateful. Why don't you offer the young lady a cup of tea, my gel?"

Bessie glanced at Kyra.

"I—I didn't like to, father," she said, shyly. "But oh, will you, please? Do!"

Kyra saw that she would be giving pleasure if she accepted; indeed, she was quite willing to remain; and Bessie bustled about and soon got the tea.

"And Mr. Black ain't come, then?" remarked Nolly, in a pause of the talk between the two girls.

Kyra saw Bessie blush vividly.

"No," she said, evidently trying to speak cheerfully. "No; something must have kept him. He said he'd be here early this afternoon."

"Mr. Black's a particular friend o' ours, miss," said Nolly, with a jerk of his head towards Bessie and a most appalling wink of his bird-like eye.

"Oh, father, how can you!" protested Bessie, quite crimson now.

"Well, what's wrong now? Ain't he? Don't he come here ever so many times a week, and didn't he give you that brooch you're wearing?" Bessie's hand went up to the brooch with an unconscious caress which told even inexperienced Kyra the whole story. "And he ain't come? Well, don't be broken-hearted; he may come yet; there's plenty o' time. And so you're new to the neighbourhood, miss?" he said, turning to Kyra. "I hope you'll like it and stick to it; and if you do, that you'll drop in and see my Bessie, here, whenever you feel so disposed; I'm sure she'll be glad to see you; and so shall I. And so will Mr. Black, eh, Bessie?" he added, with another wink and a chuckle.

"Thank you very much," said Kyra, as she rose. "I shall be very glad to do so, if I stay here."

Bessie went with her as far as the archway, and as she took Kyra's hand, said, shyly:

"You haven't told me your name yet; mine is Bessie, Bessie Nolly; but I'm always called plain Bessie."

"Most inappropriately!" Kyra said, with the smile which had helped to win poor Lance's heart. "Mine is Mary, Mary Burns. Good-bye!"

"And you will come again?" pleaded Bessie.

"Indeed, I will; and thank you!" responded Kyra.

As they parted, Kyra saw a little, old gentleman coming out of John Warden's, the carpenter's shop; and, with surprise at the coincidence, recognised Mr. Sutton. She bowed to him, and he stared at her and stroked his beard absently; but, though he raised his hat, she saw that he did not recognise her, and he shuffled past her with short, slow steps, his eyes fixed on vacancy, with the expression they always wore. At the table that night he looked at her as if he were trying to remember her, but evidently failed to do so. Mrs. Mumly came to the drawing-room after dinner and timidly asked Kyra if she would play or sing, and, much to that lady's surprise, Kyra at once rose and went to the piano. For amongst the ladies who resided at 31 Danberry Square, and other more aristocratic places, there is a recognised formula to be observed on such occasions; and it is the fashion to declare that really you haven't touched a piano for ages; that you can't play without your music; that you've a bad cold; and that you are sure you will break down; so that everybody was astonished when Kyra, without excuses or simpering, went straight to the piano and began to play and sing. Just as Lady May was surprised, so were the boarders at 31 Danberry Square. Mrs. Tonks stopped the fancy work on which she had been engaged for the last five years, the two Misses Robinson grew silent and stared in awed admiration, and presently Mr. Wicks and Mr. Mumly crept into the drawing-room shamefacedly, and the former remained at home that night, and, for the first time for some months, went to bed quite sober. When Kyra, at the earnest entreaty of her auditors, began another song, little, old Mr. Sutton shuffled into the room, and, taking up a position behind a screen, listened in an absent-minded way, shuffling out again when Kyra had finished.

The next morning the answers to some of her letters arrived; and Kyra was surprised and bitterly disappointed to find that most of the advertisements, though apparently from private persons, were really issued by registry offices; and that in response to her application for the situation offered to "a governess to one child. All found. Salary, ninety pounds per annum," there had come a letter requesting her to forward a fee of five shillings to a certain so-called registry office. Forewarned by her friend in the train, Kyra refrained from parting with her five shillings and tore up the specious letters. The others were no more satisfactory. One was from a person who required a lady secretary. It appeared that he also required a phenomenon; for he intimated in his

letter that it would be of no use for anyone to expect an engagement unless she knew type-writing and short-hand, proof-reading and commercial correspondence, Greek, Latin, French, (German desirable), and book-keeping. The salary offered being represented by the magnificent sum of twenty-five pounds per annum. It is to be presumed that the ingenuous advertiser expected to discover someone who had not only acquired these various accomplishments, but also that of living upon next door to nothing and dispensing with clothing.

As day after day brought her similar and even more ludicrously disappointing results of her answers to the advertisements, it seemed to Kyra that the only employment she could hope to obtain would be as a general servant. Some of those, she saw, were offered high wages, and there appeared to be a great demand for them.

She feared that her small stock of money would soon be exhausted and that she would soon have to have recourse to her jewellery; but the sense of freedom, the thought that she had escaped from Stracey and the Froytes forever, kept her cheerful. As the days passed she became a general favourite at 31 Danberry Square; Mrs. Tonks and the Misses Robinson talked to her—a little too much, for their loquacity, now that it had started, proved greater than their former silence; Mr. Wicks hovered about her and bloomed out into ties and scarfs and fancy waistcoats of the most elaborate designs and gorgeous colourings; Mrs. Mumly grew more than confidential, Mr. Mumly bewailed to her the severity of his labours in the city, and everyone wanted to make a bosom friend of her, save old Mr. Sutton. He was still apparently ignorant of her existence, and gazed at her vacantly from the other end of the table, stroking his white beard in the deepest state of preoccupation; but he invariably shuffled into the room when she began to sing, and always remained until she had finished.

Kyra often thought of the little court-yard and the Nollys, and she intended some day to pay a visit to the shy, pretty Bessie.

One morning as she was going up a street in Soho to apply for a situation which she had seen advertised that morning, she caught sight of Mr. Sutton slowly shuffling round a corner. She paused to look after the almost dwarf-like figure with its long white hair and beard, and at that moment he took his red silk pocket-handkerchief from his pocket and dropped a small paper packet. He was evidently unaware of his loss, and Kyra hastened after him, picked up the packet and touched him on the arm.

"You have dropped this, Mr. Sutton," she said.

He took it and stared from her to it perplexedly, then he actually displayed some excitement.

"Eh? Where did you get this? Eh? Eh?" he asked in a thin, bird-like voice. "What, what? Dropped it? Who dropped it? I? Nonsense! Do you know what it is?"

He opened it and looked at the contents, half showing them to her.

"Intaglios of the fourteenth century. Rare, very rare; wouldn't have lost them for worlds. Eh? You found them?"

He felt in his pocket as if for a coin, then shook his head.

"Come with me. Must give you something. Very rare, very! Odd how you came to find 'em! Follow me!"

Kyra followed him into one of the old-fashioned houses in the street—which was so quiet that it looked as if it had been washed up by the tide of the great thoroughfare and left high and dry—to a room on the first floor. An interesting room, surrounded by glass cases containing gems in antique settings, intaglios, cameos, medals, coins, ancient rings in brass and silver and gold and even lead, savage ornaments in jade and pebble, and such like curios. A lapidary's bench and lathe stood under the window and a chair was littered with sale catalogues, while books treating of the antiquarian lore on which he was an authority were lying about in a dusty confusion.

The old man opened a drawer, and, fumbling amongst the contents, found a sovereign and extended it to her.

"There you are," he said, and he seemed surprised and disconcerted when Kyra smilingly shook her head.

"No? Not enough? Well, they're worth more, I know; but you don't. How should you?"

"I don't want any reward, thank you," said Kyra. "I am very glad I found them for you. What beautiful things you have here, Mr. Sutton," she added, as she bent over one of the cases.

"Eh?" He looked at the sovereign as if he did not know what to do with it. "Yes, yes—you won't take it? Rubbish and nonsense! Yes, yes; some very good things. You like 'em; they interest you? I'll show you an intaglio I came across the other day. There, next that Indian stone."

"Beautiful!" said Kyra, as she examined the engraved gem he had reverently placed in her hand. "Beautiful! And so, too, is that Hindoo jade. It is a charm-stone. The inscription—"

"Eh? Yes, yes!" he broke in, eagerly, his keen, yet

dreamy eyes raised to hers. "The inscription: what does it say? You don't know, of course; how should you? I wish you did!" And he sighed.

"But I do," said Kyra, smiling. "It is Hindoostani. And it means, 'May the blessings of Siva rest upon thy head.'"

The old man stared at her in amazement.

"You read, speak Hindoostani!" he exclaimed, with suppressed excitement. "Who are you? You look like a lady—just the ordinary, foolish young person. Why—why, haven't I seen you before—" He broke off.

Kyra laughed, softly.

"Yes, every day, for some days past, Mr. Sutton."

"You know my name! How's that? How's that?" he muttered.

"I live in the same house—Danberry Square, you know. My name is Mary Burns."

He shook his head; then his face brightened.

"Yes, yes: I remember! You are the beautiful girl who sings. Yes, yes!"

Kyra blushed.

"I will go now," she said.

"Stop, stop!" he said, earnestly. "Don't go yet. I've got ever so many Hindoo things with inscriptions—What are you doing in this part of the town—wandering about alone?" He muttered to himself as he thought.

"I am looking for a situation," said Kyra.

"Looking for a situation! Governess? Rubbish! Stuff and rubbish! You know Hindoostani: too good for governess."

"No one but you appears to think that, Mr. Sutton," said Kyra, smiling a little sadly; "and, indeed, I am anxious to get any sort of situation. I am very poor. In fact, to-day, I thought of selling some jewellery I have: this—"

She drew a ring from her purse, and he took it. But, though it was of great value, handed it back contemptuously.

"Pooh! Modern, quite modern. Stupid thing; of no value—to me. Sit down."

There was no chair, but Kyra sat upon the lapidary's table, and the little, old man began to pace up and down. In the course of his pacing, he caught sight of a cameo lying in a case, and he took it up, examined it through a glass, and, apparently, forgot all about her: so Kyra sighed. He started and swung slowly round on her.

"Eh? Oh, you're there still! And you want a situation?"

Hem! Well, I don't know; you might do. Hate women about me; but she's different to the rest, somehow."

"Thank you, Mr. Sutton," said Kyra, with a laugh.

"Eh? What are you laughing at? If I thought I could trust her—but I can't, I can't. They're all alike."

"You can trust me," said Kyra, very quietly. "I am quite honest, Mr. Sutton. Are you going to offer me a situation? I hope you are."

He seemed surprised at her wonderful knowledge of his thoughts, and stared and blinked at her for a moment; then he said:

"I'll chance it. Yes, eh? Yes, I'll take you. But mind, it's a hard place! You'll have to keep all this in order." He waved his hand round the room full of curios. "You'll have to attend sales with me; you'll have to go and arrange collections and value 'em; you'll have to translate inscriptions that I can't make out; you'll have to— Oh, dear me! you couldn't do it; you're only a woman."

"At least I can try. Will you let me, Mr. Sutton?"

"Eh?" He pulled his beard and puckered his brows for a moment; then, with a sigh of resignation—a sigh that was almost a groan—he said: "Yes: I suppose I must."

And there and then Kyra found herself clerk to Herbert Sutton, antiquary, and expert in intaglios and cameos.

CHAPTER XXXI.

WHEN they have to work no one works better than the "gentle born." Kyra, who, as Bertie Gordon had told Lance, had queened it in distant India, fell to work as eagerly and zealously as a duck takes to water; indeed, old Mr. Sutton had soon to put the break on, for, not content with her efforts to acquire knowledge which was necessary if she were to be of any substantial service to her employer, she bought some books on the subjects in which he was an expert, and sat up late at night—her bedroom candles were now "an hextra," by arrangement—poring over them. Also, whenever she could find time, she repaired to the British Museum, and in the magnificent reading-room or in the gems and medal departments, studied as eagerly and persistently as any of the numerous students who daily throng that temple of learning and erudition. The museum at South Kensington also claimed and received her attention, and her slim, graceful form was familiar to the frequenters of both places: her face

would also have been familiar, but she wore a veil which baffled the most curious and interested observer.

But though she acquired a great deal of knowledge from the books and the collections at the museums, she learned more of her "trade" from Mr. Sutton. He was as keen-headed as he was eccentric and shy, and he welcomed Kyra's eagerness with satisfaction, and was evidently only too ready to impart, if not all he knew, as much as she could assimilate.

First, he set her to cataloguing the collection in the room at Walton Street, Soho; and spent many hours describing the rare intaglios and cameos and coins, and pointing out to her wherein their value and interest lay. Kyra found it delightful work, and stuck to it so hard that she grew pale and thin, and the old gentleman, who was, perhaps, not so unobservant as he appeared, insisted upon her shortening her hours of application. She declared that the walk from and to Danberry Square provided her with exercise, but he made her take a stroll in the park after her lunch, which she ate in the room, and often ordered her to put her catalogue aside and go with him to see some particularly rare coin in some private collection.

One morning he told her that he wanted her to accompany him to a sale-room. This made Kyra nervous, for she feared that she might be the only woman present; but she found this to be a mistake, for there were several besides herself, and many of them—strange old ladies, some of them, ladies with eyes darting keen, appraising glances from behind spectacles—appeared to know as much about the value of the things offered for sale as the men. Both the men and the women were too absorbed in their business to take any notice of her, but presently the "professionals" were joined by the "amateurs;" several fashionably dressed ladies and gentlemen came into the sale-room, and Kyra dropped her veil still lower and got still farther behind Mr. Sutton, though he was too small to serve as a screen. Some of the amateurs looked at the graceful figure and downcast face, but Kyra did not raise her eyes, but bent over the catalogue in which she noted the prices fetched by each lot.

While she was doing this she received a sudden shock, for she heard the auctioneer announce, in his deep, grave voice, "Lord Beechley," as the purchaser of the first lot sold. Kyra started and looked round fearfully while she half unconsciously repeated the name.

"Eh? What?" said Mr. Sutton, irritably. "Expect to see a real, live lord. Oh, he isn't here. It's a dealer buying

for him. Lord Beechley has a very fine collection at Holmby, very fine: no wonder: gives ridiculous prices: this, for instance. Got it down?"

With a sigh of relief, Kyra collected herself and resumed her work. But the names, "Beechley," "Holmby," recalled the past and set her trembling. She had thought that she had cast her old life from her, but it seemed as if she should not be permitted to forget it, strive how she would; and she had to try very hard on this occasion, for the sale was an important one, and Mr. Sutton was keen about obtaining some of the rarities. Every now and then he nodded his white head, and, diminutive as he was, the auctioneer caught the nod. If he got the lot, Mr. Sutton turned to Kyra with a nod of satisfaction, but, if he was overbid, he muttered, "Rubbish! ridiculous: too much!" or stared sorrowfully and reproachfully at the auctioneer and the person who had secured the lot.

Kyra was amazed at the huge prices some of the things fetched; a tiny, carved stone, scarcely larger than that in an ordinary-sized signet-ring, and looking worth a sovereign, would be run up, by eager competitors, to hundreds of pounds. Gems, uncut and mounted, were sold at the same time, and, to her astonishment, valuable diamonds and rubies and emeralds were handed round for inspection in pieces of tissue-paper, and as carelessly as if they were fragments of flint.

As Mr. Sutton and Kyra were leaving the room at the conclusion of the sale, the man who had purchased the intaglio for Lord Beechley approached them.

"How d'ye do, Mr. Sutton?" he said. "You bought Lot 215, I think; 'Cameo with head of Hermes;' what will you take for it? Lord Beechley wanted it, but it ran above his price."

Mr. Sutton turned to Kyra.

"Yes; we bought it. What did we give? Seventy pounds, I think."

"No; seventy-five pounds," said Kyra.

The dealer looked at her with some surprise.

"Got a clerk, Mr. Sutton?" he said, raising his hat.

"Eh, what?" snapped Mr. Sutton. "No; I don't want to sell it. I'll keep it. You wouldn't give me enough for it."

The man shrugged his shoulders.

"All right," he said, indifferently, as he turned away. "I know it goes hard with Mr. Sutton to part with anything directly he's got it," he added to Kyra. "He likes to pore

over it for a time. That's where he's different to me. I'm a dealer, and I'd sell anything for a profit—as large as I could get, of course. Lord Beechley's got the fellow of that cameo; there's a pair of 'em; and I daresay he'd give a good price. Good-afternoon, miss."

For the life of her, Kyra could not help asking Mr. Sutton, as they looked over the things they had bought, if he knew Lord Beechley.

"Eh? Oh, yes, yes; seen him often. He fancies he's a connoisseur, and knows a picture or an intaglio; just as some of 'em fancy they're a judge of horseflesh. One of the Beechleys—this man's father—was a decent judge of the antique, and the collection at Holmby was got together by him. It's a fine place, Holmby. I've been there: like the old lord: the two sons—" He shrugged his shoulders rather contemptuously. "Now, then, Miss Burns, where is that onyx ring? You notice the under-cutting? Etruscan work: that was cheap: breathe on it and get the shadows. See? Give me that Hermes that man offered to buy. Wanted it for Lord Beechley. Hem! we'll see. Put it in that case with the other cameos. How pale you look! (Worst of women: always get tired and go pale!) I suppose you are knocked up. There! Put 'em down and go home."

Kyra begged to be allowed to remain and arrange the things; but the old man waved her away impatiently, but not unkindly.

"No, no! Go away—go home; go and lie down, or I won't take you to another sale. Pity, that; for you were useful, strange to say."

"You are very kind and patient, and I am afraid I am very slow and stupid," said Kyra, flushing at his unwonted praise—which he had, apparently, repented, for he snapped:

"You're in the light! I wish you'd go home!"

The excitement of the sale—it was her first public appearance as an antiquary's secretary—had tired her, and she walked home slowly. Walked, because she made it a rule to do so, for the sake of exercise. When she came near White Horse Lane, it occurred to her that she would go and see the pretty Bessie who had made such friendly advances. In fact, Kyra was craving, not so much for sympathy, as the companionship of someone of her own age and sex, and she wanted to distract her thoughts from the memory of the past, awakened by the mention of Lord Beechley's name; besides, she had *taken* a great liking to Bessie, and believed that the liking was *reciprocated*.

The thrush was singing away to the accompaniment of the tap, tap! of John Warden's hammer; but the latter ceased as Kyra entered the court-yard, and looked up and touched his hat with a smile; but Kyra fancied that the smile was not a particularly cheerful one, and that he glanced towards the Nollys' brightly painted little house in the wall rather sadly.

Bessie was not in sight, but as Kyra approached the door, she saw her sitting at the table with some work in her hands; but the hands were motionless, and the girl gazed before her vacantly, and she looked pale and melancholy. Her face brightened, however, at the sight of Kyra, and she sprang up with a low cry of welcome.

"Oh, I am so glad!" she exclaimed. "I thought you had forgotten your promise and were never coming again! Come and sit down—there, in the easy-chair; and won't you take off your hat and jacket?"

"I'll unbutton my jacket," said Kyra. "I have not long to stay. I would have come before, but I have been very busy. I have found some employment, and am secretary to an old gentleman."

Bessie regarded her with awe.

"Are you really? A secretary! Not that I ought to be surprised, for I know you must be clever as well as beautiful. I can tell by your face and the way you speak. Oh, I am glad! But you will come as often as you can, won't you? I have so longed to see you again."

She sighed, and Kyra said, gently:

"You are not looking as well as when I saw you last; have you been ill?"

"Oh, no," replied Bessie, blushing a little, and busying herself in folding up her work, so that her face was averted; "not ill—not really ill. But I haven't been very well. It's—it's been so hot, hasn't it?" she went on, hurriedly. "It often is at the end of the summer, isn't it?"

"Perhaps you want a change—some country air," suggested Kyra; but the suggestion seemed to alarm Bessie.

"Oh, no, no!" she said, quickly. "I shouldn't like to go away, to leave the Lane even for a day. I couldn't leave father, you know," she added, as if she wished to explain her earnestness; "and besides, the air here is really wonderful; they say that it's quite as good as Margate or Ramsgate. But you are looking rather pale this afternoon."

"I am rather tired," said Kyra. "I have been attending a sale, and the work was quite new to me and the crowd and

most, for speaking so plain-like; but I've bin hopin' ever since you came that you was goin' to be a friend of Bessie's—"

"So I am, I hope," said Kyra, quickly. "But I must not talk about Miss Nolly's private affairs, especially when she has not spoken to me about them."

John looked disappointed and tilted his paper cap aside as that he could scratch his head with the handle of the hammer.

"Of course not, miss," he said. "You, bein' a lady, knows what's right an' wrong; but I was hopin' that she'd told you. And it ain't for me to speak about it, if she's kept silence; but—but I wish as he'd broke his neck before he come playin' the fine gentleman in White Horse Lane. Good-evenin', miss, and forgive me speakin' so open to you. It's— it's for Bessie's sake— No, it isn't," he broke off, with a kind of fierce doggedness; "it's for my own as much as hers. It goes nigh to break my heart to see her frettin' and wastin' away for a man that isn't fit to breathe the same air. Pardon, miss! Good-evenin'!"

He touched his cap again as Kyra walked away quickly—for she was already late for dinner—and went back to his work; but five minutes later he heard a step on the pavement, and, looking up, saw the hated Mr. Black going across the yard towards the Nollys'.

CHAPTER XXXII.

BY one of those strange coincidences—which, by the way, are not strange, for life is full of them—Stracey missed meeting Kyra by just the five minutes. As he came with his slow and light step across the yard, he frowned slightly and his lips twitched. He had not been to the Lane for some time, and he was here now with a curious mixture of reluctance and pleasure. His circumstances had changed since his last visit; he was rich, enormously rich, now; for though Kyra's money had gone to his father, it was, as Stracey knew, virtually his; he was wealthy and meant to take every possible advantage of his wealth. Money is the great lever nowadays, it is the "open sesame" which gives the *entrée* to doors which were once closed to everything but rank and worth; by the lever of wealth Stracey meant to raise himself in the world, by its "open sesame" he meant to gain an entrance to the places where abide those elect of the world, the class which calls itself "Society." There was no limit to his ambition; and ever since Kyra's supposed death he had given the rein to his

imagination, to the vision of a future made splendid by the luxury and power which money can buy.

He would not only have horses to ride, carriages to loll in, houses, in town and country, filled with guests of rank and fashion; but he would himself become a member of that rank and fashion. For instance, such a man as he might be sure of getting a seat in the House of Commons, and there he would fight and scheme his way to place and power.

Therefore, it was incumbent upon him to cut such low and insignificant acquaintances as the Nollys, to get rid of his past life as a snake sloughs its old skin.

Bessie would have seen no more of "Mr. Black" if it had not been for the existence of the forged cheque. While Nolly held that Stracey knew that he was at the mercy of the Nollys. It would be a nice state of things if, when Stracey was at the top of the tree, a Member of Parliament, ruffling it with the mighty ones of the earth, the old, disreputable horse-dealer should turn up to blackmail him. No; by hook or by crook Stracey had to get that cheque.

Then, again, Bessie's evident love for him was pleasant to him. He had actually, during the last few weeks, missed the flattery of her devotion—dog-like devotion. No man dislikes being passionately adored by a young and pretty girl with soft and lovable ways, and Stracey hankered after Bessie, though he knew that it would be wiser of him to give up all thought of her. It was quite impossible, had always been impossible, that he should marry, and whatever his intentions respecting her had been, he was aware that it would be foolish to entangle himself in an intrigue just as he was starting on his path of ambition. He would just see her once—or twice—more, would get hold of the cheque and then—he shrugged his shoulders as he knocked at the door—well, then, good-bye, Miss Bessie!

Then Bessie came to the door, trying not to fly at it, her pretty face all aglow with joy and happiness. She was so overcome by the sight of him that she could not speak, and could only gaze at him with all her glowing heart in her blue eyes; and Stracey's heart—or what he called his heart—beat thickly with flattered vanity at her innocently passionate welcome.

"Oh!" she murmured, with a little gasp.

That was all; but Stracey understood, and smiled down at her softly and meaningly as he tenderly pressed her fluttering hand.

"I thought you were never coming again!" she said, after

a pregnant silence, during which he had taken his accustomed chair, crossing his legs in his slow, languid way, and resting his white, well-kept hands upon them. "Have you been abroad again? And you're all in black! Are you in mourning; has anyone died?" She was quick to notice the smallest detail in his appearance and dress; and the merest trifles in his life were of keen interest to her.

"Yes; I have been abroad," he said, "and I have lost a relative, a distant relative. There has been a great deal to do in connection with her—his death, and that has prevented me coming. You're not looking so well as you did, Bessie," he added, tenderly, and he stretched out his hand and touched her sympathetically, caressingly.

Bessie blushed and shook her head.

"Oh, I'm all right—now," she said: and she was. His presence had dispelled the weakness and languor which had weighed upon her, and restored the faint colour to her cheeks and the old bright light to her eyes. "Have you had your tea? Let me get you some."

Directly a woman learns to love a man, she wants to minister to him—to feed him, to give him drink, to see him at ease and in good content.

"No tea? Are you sure? Then you must have some whiskey-and-water. And won't you smoke? Do? I—I like to see you smoking. And you'll wait until father comes? He won't be long now."

Stracey lit his cigarette—he took it from a gold case set with turquoise: and lit it with a match from a box of the same precious metal: they were recent purchases—and leant back, regarding her with a look which a woman so keenly desires to see in the eyes of the man she loves.

"Yes; I'll wait, Bessie," he said, softly; "but I'm in no hurry for him to come in. It is nice to be here alone with you. I can't tell you how often I've thought of you while I've been away: in fact, it would be easier to tell you when I have not thought of you; for you are always in my mind."

She brought the whiskey and offered it to him with downcast eyes, and as he took the glass he laid his hand on her arm and drew her gently into the chair beside him. She sat with heavily lidded eyes and heaving bosom; and, as he looked at her, he thought how pretty she was; and, yes, that it certainly would be nice to have her in the little villa in which he had so often pictured her, all to himself, to enjoy her evident devotion. Prudence whispered that the temptation was a dangerous one, and that he would be foolish to hamper him-

self with the girl, but—she was such a soft, delicious little thing, and loved him so passionately!

"Yes, I've often wished you were with me, Bessie," he said, yielding to the desire to see her colour grow still deeper, to feel the little hand flutter still more desperately in his: it is difficult for the hawk to loose its hold of the sparrow, for the leopard to release the lamb. "It would have made me so happy." She could only catch her breath and screen her eyes still more deeply from his gaze, which she could feel penetrating to the very centre of the loving heart. "Do you wish you had been with me, Bessie?"

She had to look up, and did manage to glance at him for a second, and he read her answer easily enough in the blue eyes, and smiled with satisfaction and gratified vanity.

"I wish it could have been," she said, with a deep sigh; and she looked up again with grave regard and questioning.

"Yes, Bessie," he went on, in his softest voice. "You know I love you"—she trembled all over, and her bosom rose and fell as if she could scarcely breathe—"I'm sure you must know that, though I haven't dared to say so."

"Dared!" she echoed, faintly, with wonder; for surely he, too, must know that she loved him!

Why, often as she lay awake at night she had blushed with shame at the thought of how plainly she had shown it to him!

"Yes. Ever so many times I have been on the point of telling you," he said, with a sigh, "but I have had to check myself, hard as it has been to do so. You see, Bessie, we can't all of us do what we want to do. But I've said it now, because I couldn't help it; and now you know I love you. Do you love me in return, just a little?"

His arm slid round her as he drew her to him and he raised her downcast face and kissed her on the lips. If there are worse kisses than that of Judas, this assuredly was one of them.

Bessie uttered a faint cry and hid her face against his breast, and Stracey, his eyes gleaming with an unholy fire, pressed her to him as he murmured in his softest voice:

"Dear little Bessie, dear little Bessie!"

"Why—why did you say you dared not?" she murmured, after a time. "You knew—oh, yes, you knew that—"

"Yes, I thought that you cared for me just a little, perhaps," he replied; "it was for another reason that I did not tell you. You see, Bessie, you don't know how I am placed."

"No," she murmured; "I know so little about you: nothing—only that—that I love you. And, now that I know you love me, that is all I want to know."

"That's all very well," he said, laughing softly, as he kissed her hair and eyes; "but there are other things. You see, Bessie, if I were like other men—like our friend, the carpenter over the way there, for instance"—"our friend, the carpenter," was at that moment leaning against his loft door smoking and staring moodily at the pigeons—"it would be easy enough to—to ask you to be my wife; but it is different with me."

She stroked his hand and waited with patient humility. Yes; he was different to such persons as poor John. He was a gentleman, and there well might be all sorts of reasons for his silence.

"You see, I have to think of others; more particularly I have to consider my father."

"Your father?" she murmured meekly and with awe. He nodded.

"Yes; I am more or less dependent on him, and, if I were to marry without his consent, I should be ruined. I don't mind that, of course—"

"Ah, but yes!" she breathed. "Oh, I shouldn't like you to be ruined for—for loving me!"

"Dearest! It is not of myself that I am thinking, but of you. I have no right to ruin your future—"

"You won't!" she broke in, eagerly. "I—we—I can wait. I don't mind how long I wait, if—if you will go on loving me."

Stracey frowned above her head that lay on his breast. He did not want to wait; he wanted her at once.

"I am afraid we should have to wait a long time—I mean that my father is not an old man; and he would never give his consent. He wants me to marry a—well, a lady of rank and position."

Bessie sighed. It seemed so probable.

"Yes, I can understand. Oh, what a pity that you should have given a thought to me! Then—then it is all of no—no use? You—you will have to give me up!"

She shuddered, and, of course, clung all the closer to him.

"Give you up? Not likely! How little you know me, Bessie," he said. "No, while I have been sitting here, since I have known that you care for me, I have thought of a plan, a way—"

She raised her head and looked at him, her eyes, dim a moment before, now alight again with hope.

—"It all depends on you, Bessie."

"On me?" she breathed.

"Yes. If we wait until my father gives his consent we shall never be married—you will never be my wife." She shivered again and her hand closed on his arm. "But there is no reason why we shouldn't be married secretly."

She started and raised her head, and Stracey eyed her covertly.

"There's no difficulty," he went on, suavely, caressing her golden hair with his soft hand. "It can be managed quite easily; it is done every day. Leave it all to me, dearest. We can be married without anyone knowing it."

"Excepting father," she murmured. "You will tell father?"

His lip twitched and he frowned thoughtfully.

"No; not until afterwards," he said. "Of course, I should like to tell him everything, and at once; but would it be wise, dear? Your father is—well, he is rather proud—and he's quite right, with such a pearl of a daughter—and he might, I say he might object, to a secret marriage; in fact, I'm sure he would. He's old-fashioned, you see."

Bessie did not speak. She knew that her father was too proud to consent to a clandestine marriage.

"After we were married, actually married," Stracey went on, persuasively, "he would consent, for both our sakes, to keep the secret. Do you see? We could write him a letter on our honey-moon—think of it, Bessie: our honey-moon"—she thrilled and pressed a kiss on his waistcoat—"explaining everything. He would understand why we had to be married on the quiet. Just think of it, Bessie! You and I together on the Continent, in all the places I've told you of! You and I together—all the beautiful foreign cities, and the theatres and concerts and dances! And, of course, you'll be a lady, a real lady, like the rest of the great folk."

"Shall I?" she murmured. "But I don't care so much for that—though it will be nice—it is the thought that I shall be with *you*!"

"Very well, then," he said. "Make up your mind. Say 'Yes,' and we'll be husband and wife. Husband and wife, Bessie! You know what that means! Think of it, dearest!"

She hid her face for a moment, then her lips formed the "Yes" even as they kissed him. The usually cold blood in Stracey's veins ran hotly. He thought for a moment, but

passion was too strong for prudence. Despite the cheque, he would have her.

"That's right!" he said, approvingly. "You must meet me to-morrow evening, at six o'clock, at Victoria Station. Leave here at five, and take a hansom cab at the Angel. You need not bring more than a hand-bag—we can buy all the clothes you want—and you will want a great deal, Bessie, for my little wife must be nicely dressed."

She nodded as if she understood, but not with gratified vanity. If rags had been suitable for his wife, she would have been content.

"I will be waiting for you just inside the entrance. We will cross over to France and be married—"

"Can't we be married here, in England?" she asked, but not suspiciously.

"N-o, I'm afraid not," he replied. "The laws are so strict; there are so many difficulties; in France it is quite easy. You are not afraid—you trust me, Bessie?"

Oh, yes; she trusted him. She looked up at him with her trustfulness eloquent in her shining eyes. He was her god and could think, and do, no wrong.

"You will leave here at five," he said, "and I will be waiting for you at Victoria Station; and we will be married directly we get to France; and then we will write to your father and explain. Do you understand? You will come, Bessie, my dearest love?"

"Yes," she breathed. "I—I will come. Hush! Father!"

She drew away from him as old Nolly rode into the yard, and went to the door to meet him.

"Well, Bessie, my lass!" he cried. "And, hallo! if it isn't Mr. Black! How are you? Here, you!" and he threw the reins to the stable-man, who was just not too drunk to catch them. "An' where have you been all this time?" to Stracey. "Abroad, eh? Well, you're a rover, an' no mistake! We thought we'd lost you, didn't we, Bessie?"

He looked at Bessie and nodded and winked significantly, and smiled as he noted her altered looks, the blush on her face, and the happy light in her eyes.

"No, I don't want no tea. Bring me and Mr. Black a drink under the tree."

He took off his coat and dropped on to the seat under the old elm.

"Phew! It's hot! An' so you've bin abroad agen? You are a rover, you are. I've had a good day; picked up a couple of 'osses dirt cheap. You're lookin' rather pale and peaky.

That's foreign air. I'm told that it's somethink drefful—Here's the tippie," he broke off, as Bessie brought the whiskey-and-water and glanced at Stracey with love in her eyes. "Well, here's your health, Black. We've missed you—yes, I'll say that, for you're good company, you know. Leastways, my Bessie seems to think so. In fact, she seems to think too much of you—more than you're worth, I daresay. If you was a marryin' man, it 'ud make you quite conceited."

"I am much honoured by Miss Bessie's good will," said Stracey.

Old Nolly looked at him curiously; and slowly drained his glass, still eyeing him.

"That sounds nice and ighfalutin'," he said, after a pause; "but the question is, what do you mean by it? If you mean business, well an' good. If you don't—" His one eye stared at Stracey keenly. "Well, sheer off! But this I'll say: if you mean business—well, a certain cheque you and I know of"—he glanced at the coat which he had thrown at the back of the seat—"will be handed to you as a wedding-present—as a wedding-present. You understand me?"

His voice was thick; he had been drinking, as Stracey was quick to see.

"I quite understand, Nolly," he said. "But I must speak to Bessie."

"That's all right!" Nolly broke in. "I don't want to influence her. No, no; leave the girls to choose for themselves, I say. But—you understand! Cheque's there"—he glanced at the coat again—"an' it shall be handed to you on the day of your marriage to my gel. It's her own choice—oh, I ain't blind! I can see through a stone wall as far as most folks—but there it is. The cheque's yours the day you're married. Yes, I've had a good day. Cleared a matter of twenty poun'. Not bad, that! Hi, Bessie, bring us some whiskey! Gin for Mr. Black. But no doubt you know his fav'rite tippie."

Bessie brought out a relay of glasses, and old Nolly drank freely, after the manner of his kind when they have had a "long" day. He gave a detailed account of it to Stracey, nodding as he did so, and Stracey proved a good listener.

Presently Nolly's bald head began to slope towards the tree, and after a moment or two fell back against it; and he slept the sleep of the unjust and the just. Bessie was in the house. Stracey looked round. Nothing was stirring in the courtyard, for the pigeons and the sparrows had gone to bed, and the blind basket-maker and his dog had departed. Stracey's hand stole to the coat which Nolly had thrown off, and

stealthily he took out the old pocket-book, bulging with papers, and, striking a match, examined the contents. As he had expected, the forged cheque was amongst them. With a smile and a long breath of relief, he took it from the pocket-book and transferred it to his own waistcoat pocket.

A moment afterwards Bessie came out. She paused at the sight of her sleeping father, and Stracey went to her and put his arm round her.

His small eyes were glowing with triumph.

"I'm going," he whispered. "Don't wake your father: he's tired. Remember! Six o'clock, to-morrow, Victoria—say a quarter to six—you won't fail?"

She lifted her flower-like face to his, with all her love eloquent in her blue eyes.

"I won't—fail!" she breathed. "But—but if I could only tell my father!"

"You cannot! You must not!" he said. "It would ruin us! Good-night! Kiss me again. Ah!"

He untwined her arms from his neck and walked quickly to the archway. As he reached it a man stepped out from the shadows. It was John Warden. He stretched out his hand as if to detain the fashionably dressed figure to which he made so strong a contrast, and his voice was thick and hoarse as he said:

"'Alf a moment, mister."

"Well," said Stracey, with a mixture of impatience and contempt. "What do you want with me, my man. Are you—begging?"

John's face went red as brick-dust.

"No, sir, not beggin'!" he said. "I'm only goin' to ask a question. You're—you're a friend of Mr. Nolly's, of his daughter Bessie—Don't go! I won't keep you long. What I want to ask is, do you mean well by her? You've been here off an' on for months past. An' she looks for your comin': oh, I know that, I see that! But do you mean well by her? You're different to the rest of us. You're a gentleman, so she says—"

He stopped to get his breath, and Stracey, eyeing him keenly, smiled contemptuously.

"I fail to see what right you have to question me, my good man," he said.

Now, to call a person a "good man," or a woman a "good woman," in Islington, is to convey a deadly insult; why and wherefore this writer wotteth not. The blood rose to honest John Warden's face, and his great hands closed into fists.

"That may be!" he said, doggedly. "But so it is. I've the right that belongs to every honest man to take care o' the girl he's known since her childhood."

"If you refer to Miss Nolly, she's no longer in her childhood," said Stracey, sneeringly. "She's a woman, and can take care of herself, without your interference, my good fellow."

"Ah, but can she?" said John, gravely. "I've my doubts. But I warn you. You've been comin' an' goin' for months past, and she— But no matter. What I says and means is that if you don't mean fair by her, you've got to reckon wi' me!"

Stracey laughed as he turned on his heel.

"You have been drinking, my friend," he said. "Go and sleep it off. When you are sober you will remember that Miss Nolly will not thank you for your interference in her affairs. Good-evening."

He went on his way smiling: for he had the forged cheque in his pocket; and Bessie had promised to meet him at Victoria at six o'clock the next day.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

KYRA's thoughts were much occupied with Bessie that evening; she liked the girl and resolved to see more of her, to help her to a more cheerful state of mind. Bessie no doubt moped for want of something to do, and the companionship of another girl would soon dispel her melancholy. Kyra could not get the girl out of her mind, even when she was playing and singing for Mrs. Mumly's "guests," as usual. As usual, also, Mr. Wicks was present in the drawing-room. He had become a "reformed character" since Kyra's arrival, and the gaities of the music-hall and the High Street no longer held any joy for him.

After he had smoked his cigarette in the dining-room, it was now his custom to come into the drawing-room—to "join the ladies," as Mrs. Mumly called it—and on the first occasions he took a chair near the door, and listened in the attitude which the gentlemen considered the proper one in the society of ladies, namely, bolt upright, with his hands folded on his knee; but gradually he had drawn the chair nearer the piano, where he sat leaning his head on his hands, and gazing with a sad and woe-begone expression at Kyra's lovely profile. It scarcely need be said that Mr. Wicks was in love, but, though everyone in the house was aware of it—the ladies whin-

pered and giggled amongst themselves when Kyra was absent, and Mr. Mumly chaffed Mr. Wicks over their tobacco—Kyra was in complete ignorance of his lamentable condition. She had only exchanged a few words with him, and those were confined to the usual greetings or a request to pass the salt, for Mr. Wicks was too shy to reveal his passion to her, and let concealment, like a worm i' the bud, feed upon his more or less damask cheek.

"What am I that I should dare to raise my eyes to one so 'igh above me?" he had tragically enquired of Mr. Mumly; and even that gentleman's assurance that "only the brave deserved the fair" had not been sufficient to inspire Mr. Wicks with courage. It is true that often he consumed the midnight candle—which had also in his case become "a hextra"—by musing on Kyra's beauty and grace, and by brooding on the hopelessness of his "passion," and that now and again he relieved his feelings by rehearsing a scene in which he avowed his love and threw himself and his salary at Kyra's feet; but to mutter a flow of words in the silent watches of the night, and in the secrecy of one's bed-chamber, is a very different thing to saying it aloud; so Mr. Wicks, who was considered rather a "bold 'un" by his associates, was always stricken dumb in Kyra's presence. But looks are eloquent, and if Kyra had not been so absorbed in her own thoughts, in her communion with the past, she could not fail to have noticed the melancholy expression of Mr. Wicks's face as he stared at her from his post beside the piano.

This evening his parlous state was more obvious than usual, for Kyra had sung his favourite song, "Robin Adair"—he had got Mrs. Tonks to ask for it—and he was almost moved to tears, a condition in which he always looked as if he were suffering from a peculiarly trying cold in the head; and Kyra, happening to glance in his direction, was struck by his appearance, and said, quite innocently:

"I'm afraid you have a cold, Mr. Wicks: you ought not to sit in a draught."

Mr. Wicks grew the colour of beet-root, and, murmuring something incoherently, hastily shifted his position to one behind the screen, at which he glared gloomily during the remainder of Kyra's performance, which was not a lengthy one, for she was tired and went to bed earlier than usual. When she had gone Mr. Wicks retired to the dining-room, filled his pipe with horribly strong tobacco, and transferred his gloomy stare from the screen to Mr. Mumly, who was sitting over his *last*—but three—whiskey.

"Well, my boy, how did it go to-night?" he enquired, with a kind of waggish sympathy. "I look towards you. Join me in a glass."

"I've lost my taste for whiskey," said Mr. Wicks; but he filled his glass all the same. "I've lost my taste for life generally; tobacco's the only thing that soothes me."

"Well, it's strong enough to kill you," Mr. Mumly remarked, as the pregnant odour got into his eyes. "But there, I understand; I can sympathise with you. I remember, when I was courtin' Mrs. Mumly, I was just like what you are. But I flew to liquor; different men 'as different ways. But you must pluck up 'eart, Wicks: be a man. 'Faint 'eart—"

"I know all about that," said Mr. Wicks, shortly, for the adage, by constant repetition, had become somewhat irritating. "But what's the use. She's far above me, an' I know it. She's a star—"

"Oh, no, she ain't," said Mr. Mumly. "She's old Sutton's secretary— Oh, you mean a star in 'eaven," he added, as Mr. Wicks snorted with disgust. "I was thinking for the moment you meant a theatre, or music-hall, star."

"She's a star in 'eaven, and I'm only a mere mortal—a worm in her path," said Mr. Wicks, with tragic melancholy. "I'm the dust under her feet; and it's how she considers me. Oh, I know! I don't deceive myself—this whiskey isn't bad: 'George and Dragon?' Thought I recognised it— No, Mumly, she's not for me; she don't give me a thought. Yesterday, when I passed her the salt, she scarcely looked at me when she said, 'Thank you.' Her mind—her soul—was far away. And to-night, when all my 'eart was in my eyes when she'd finished that song—that song will 'aunt me in my grave, Mumly, you see if it don't!—she asked me if I 'adn't a cold, and said I oughn't to sit in a draught. No, I'm nothing to her—nothing whatever."

"Perhaps there's someone else," was Mr. Mumly's not very consoling suggestion.

Mr. Wicks scowled fearfully. "I've thought of that; yes, there may be. If there is, I warn that man, Mumly; yes, I warn him! If I get on his track, let him beware!"

"Oh, but I say, you know!" Mr. Mumly remonstrated, taking out his pipe to stare at the bloodthirsty youth. "You can't indulge yourself in that kind o' thing. There's the p'lice—"

"I am indifferent to the p'lice," Mr. Wicks declared, with terrible calmness. "I am indifferent to everything. I don't care *that* for my own safety. No, you will see! Let him re-

veal himself, and you will see! I'd punch his 'ead if he was as big as the Sheffield Smasher."

"You don't suspect anyone, do you, Wicks?" asked Mr. Mumly.

Mr. Wicks scowled, and nodded darkly over his glass of whiskey.

"I do and I do not," he replied, mysteriously. "Visits to a certain place in the neighbourhood—a place under an archway—may have a meaning, or may not; but such visits have been made. Only this afternoon—I'm speaking to a friend, Mumly, and in strict confidence—"

"That's me. I'm all right, my boy," responded Mr. Mumly, promptly.

—"Only this afternoon I saw her going in there. No, I was not shadowing her; I'd scorn to do it. It's on my way home from the bank, and I 'appened to see her: and not for the first time."

"She may be going to see some of her people, or a lady friend."

"She may," admitted Mr. Wicks, but he frowned still more darkly, partly because he burnt his finger in fiercely ramming the tobacco in his pipe, "and the tall, dark swell I've seen going in there may be her brother."

"He may: she's a swell—a real swell, herself, you know," assented Mr. Mumly.

"Quite so: but there isn't much resemblance. No matter. I shall find out—"

"Why not ask her, straight out?" suggested Mr. Mumly. "You might say, 'From information I have received'—that don't commit you to anything—'I have reason to believe that you're engaged; if that is so, I have no more to say, Miss Burns.'"

But this course of procedure evidently did not commend itself to Mr. Wicks, who shook his head moodily, not to say with some alarm.

"No," he said; "I will find out for myself. Mind, I'm not going to act as a spy; understand that, Mumly. But if I choose to walk past White Horse Lane at odd times—when I'm free of the bank—that's no business of anybody's but myself; and, if it is, I should like that person to inform me," he added, as he sat down the empty glass on the uncovered table; and, glaring as fiercely at Mumly, he got his candle and stalked up to bed, pausing outside Kyra's door to sigh heavily.

Kyra intended calling on Bessie the next day, but she had to accompany Mr. Sutton to a sale a little way out of London,

and they did not get back until late. On this occasion Kyra was not at all nervous, and Mr. Sutton—perhaps because he had had a “good day,” and was in a correspondingly good humour—told her that she might take a holiday the next day.

“Though I don’t know what on earth you want one for: haven’t had one myself for forty years: and that was a funeral.”

Indeed, Kyra would have been rather puzzled to know what to do with herself, but for Bessie. As it was, she decided to go round to her after breakfast and persuade her to come and spend the day in the country. She came down to breakfast in her hat and jacket, a fact which Mr. Wicks was quick to notice; and he looked up and caught his breath so suddenly, when she told Mrs. Mumly that she had a holiday and was going out for the day, that he nearly choked himself with the piece of toast which happened to be in his mouth at the moment.

A few minutes afterwards he took his crimson face from the table, and, ramming on his hat with an air of determination, left the house; but he did not go farther than the corner, from whence he watched for Kyra’s appearance, and then cautiously followed her down the street.

Kyra, quite unconscious that she was being “shadowed,” reached White Horse Lane, and Mr. Wicks, who had half an hour to spare before he was due at the bank, took up his position just outside the archway. As Kyra entered the court, she was struck by its unusual quietude; and, looking round, saw that John Warden was not at his bench, and noticed that there was no sound of hammer and chisel. The door of Nolly’s cottage was closed, and the cat, who was sitting on the door-step, flew fearfully at her approach, as if it had been recently startled and scared.

She knocked at the door, but for some moments there was no response; then she heard a slow, heavy step, the door was thrown open, and Mr. Nolly stood before her. Kyra was smitten to silence by his appearance, for his face was white and haggard, with every line in it deepened; and his one eye glared at her wildly as if he were half bewildered by some sudden shock.

“Well?” he demanded, hoarsely. “Who is it? What do you want?”

“It is Miss Burns, the young lady—” said a voice as husky and hoarse as Mr. Nolly’s; and Kyra saw John Warden standing by the window. He, too, was white and worn-looking, and he scarcely raised his head, which drooped upon his breast.

His hands were clenched upon his cap, and Kyra saw that they were shaking. She looked from one man to another for a moment or two, possessed by a vague fear, then she found her voice.

"I have come to ask Miss Nolly—Bessie—to spend the day with me," she said.

Nolly stared at her, then turned to John Warden with a bitter laugh.

"You hear!" he said, fiercely. "She's come for Bessie: to spend the day with her!" He laughed wildly and plucked at his lips. "You've come too late, miss! There's no Bessie here! Tell her, John: I can't. I'm choking!"

John came forward with the heavy gait of an old man.

"We've—we've got bad news, miss," he said, thickly. "Won't you sit down?"

Kyra sank into a chair and looked at him anxiously.

"Is—is she ill?—oh, not dead!"

"No such luck!" groaned the distracted father, bitterly.

John, wincing as though he had been struck, laid his hand upon Nolly's arm.

"Hush, hush! No, no!" he said in a low voice. "Don't say that. You don't know all—yet! It's this way, miss. Bessie—Bessie—she have gone."

He put his huge hand up to his throat as if the words had stuck there, and his lips quivered.

"Gone!" echoed Kyra. "Gone? Where? She was here the day before yesterday. I was here—you know—she said nothing about leaving."

"She went last night," said John in a low voice.

"But do you not know where she has gone?" asked Kyra, beginning to tremble on her part.

John shook his head.

"But—but why are you so alarmed?" she said. "She may have gone to stay with some friend, she may have met with some accident—oh, a slight one, I hope and trust!—and may not have been able to send to you."

John shook his head again, and Nolly raised his head from the table, and, looking past her, threw down a letter which he had held crushed in his hand.

"Show it to her—let her read it," he said in a dry voice. "What's it matter who knows?—sides, she was kind to her. Show it to her!"

John straightened the letter and handed it to Kyra. It was only a few lines; and Kyra uttered a faint cry of sympathy as she read them.

"DEAR FATHER,—I am going away, abroad, with Mr. Black to be married. Oh, do forgive me for leaving you so suddenly and secretly, but it can't be avoided. There are reasons why we should be married without anyone knowing it—family reasons of Mr. Black's; but the very moment I can and he will let me, I will write to you and tell you where we are. Forgive me, father, and be kind to me—I love him so very much! I couldn't live without him.

"Your loving daughter, BESSIE."

John took the letter from Kyra and folded it tenderly but absently, his eyes fixed on it as if he did not see it; and Kyra drew a long breath of relief.

"I am very, very sorry," she said, gently. "But—but—oh, I know you are angry, and that it was very wrong and—and thoughtless of her. But why do you look so alarmed and grieved? She is to be married—"

Nolly raised his hand and struck the table, and John turned away to the window.

"That's—that's what I tell him," he said. "She's to be married—is most like married by now—"

"It's a lie!" cried Nolly, hoarsely. "He won't marry her! *Why should he?* If he'd wanted to make her an honest wife, what was there to prevent him? He knew I wasn't averse. I told him so the other night! Oh, my God! To think that my Bessie, my gel, should be deceived by a villain and a thief!"

"A thief!" said Kyra, aghast.

"Yes!" groaned Nolly. "He stole something from me the other night"—he took out his pocket-book and struck it with his hand—"took it from here as I was asleep. It was something that 'ud have sent him to penal servitude. I'd promised to give it to him the day he married Bessie—for I thought he'd turned over a new leaf and given up the old life, as I'd done! Why couldn't he wait and marry her in a proper way? And he would have waited if he had meant well by her; but I know by his stealing the cheque that he means her ruin! Oh, my gel, my little gel!"

Kyra rose, pale and trembling, the tears rushing to her eyes at the sight of the old man's terrible grief and despair.

"Can you not follow them—find them?" she asked, almost inaudibly. "The letter—is there no address—no clue?"

John shook his head.

"It came by this morning's post. It was posted in the West End last night, miss. They must have gone by the

evening mail to foreign parts. There's no clue. I've been to the big stations this morning; but—"

He shook his head again.

"But this Mr.—Mr. Black," she urged, timidly; "you know his address—his friends—"

"I've been to his lodgings, miss. He's given them up some time back. Mr. Nolly don't know any of his friends, or anything about him."

"What sort of man—what was he like?" asked Kyra, aching to say something that might console them, give them hope. "You may be doing him a great injustice; there may be reasons, as poor Bessie says."

John sighed heavily and raised his eyes to hers significantly.

"He was a kind o' gentleman," he said, in a low, dry voice. "Fashionably dressed, and soft spoken—it was his gentlemanly ways as won her heart and deceived her. But I mistrusted him from the first. He had a way of sneering in his smile and of looking under his lids as if he'd something to conceal— You think I'm hard on him because I—I loved her; but I don't think I am. I mistrusted him from the first."

"But—but Bessie is so sweet and good a girl," Kyra murmured, painfully.

John groaned and broke down for a moment and hid his care-worn face in his rough hands. There was silence. Suddenly the thrush began to sing. Old Nolly looked up as if startled, then, with a fierce cry, he sprang to the door, and, seizing the cage savagely, was about to fling it to the ground; but Kyra put her hand upon his arm and stayed him.

"Oh, no, no!" she pleaded, the tears running down her cheek. "She may come back, she will—I am sure she will! You must not kill the poor bird—she loves it!"

With a dull, vacant stare he allowed her to take the cage from him and hang it in its old place.

"God bless you, miss!" said John, thickly. "If—if she'd known more of you, you might 'ave saved her from him. I—I wish she had!"

"It will all come right; she will come back to you, I am sure she will," said Kyra, almost inaudibly. "Is there anything I can do? Oh, if there was anything—"

John shook his head and looked at the grief-stricken father as he staggered back to the room, and sinking into the chair by the table, hid his face on his arms.

"I'm afraid not, miss; nothing for her. But—but if you'd be so kind as to come and see him now and agen, it—it might

help him to bear it. You see, he've only me, and I'm only a man; besides"—his face darkened—"I want to look for her. I may find her, or I may not, but I must search."

"Yes, yes!" said Kyra, earnestly; "and you will find that you have suffered, have been alarmed, without cause!"

"P'raps so, miss," he said, in a hopeless voice. Then he raised his bent head and looked beyond her with an expression which sent a thrill of fear through Kyra's veins. "If I don't, if it's as I and her father fear, then let *him* beware o' me! For if hell itself stood 'twixt me an' him, I'd take my payment for the wrong he's done her!"

"Oh, hush, hush!" pleaded Kyra, shudderingly. "You do not know what you are saying— Oh, I know how you must be suffering—"

"My suffering's nothing," he said, with a kind of rough dignity. "It's *hers* I'm thinkin' of; and for hers he shall pay with every drop of his black blood! Forgive me, miss!" he added, his voice breaking. "It's not for the like of you to hear such things; I know that. I'll go in to him now: he needs me. God bless you for your kindness to her and to us!"

Kyra turned away—what good could she do by remaining?—and half blinded by her tears, almost ran into a young man who was standing by the archway.

Mr. Wicks had been so absorbed in watching Kyra, and so affected in various ways by the sight of her distress, that he had scarcely the power to move, and he stood gaping at her with his mouth wide open, and his round, simple face a vivid scarlet. Kyra, on her part, regarded him with some natural surprise.

"Mr. Wicks!" she said, hastily wiping her eyes.

"Yes, it's me, Miss Burns," he said, with a kind of dogged shame-facedness. "It's me. And, oh, yes! I've been watching you. But not out of disrespect—far from it."

"I am sure of that," said Kyra, gently, but still with surprise. "But why were you watching me—what is it you want to know? I don't understand."

Mr. Wicks was not so foolish as he looked and talked: they've no use for fools in banks; and he saw that she was in some trouble and that he might help her. He looked at his watch.

"I've only got about three minutes more," he said, desperately. "Something's wrong; you've been crying: I can see you have, so it isn't any use denyin' it. I suppose I can't presume to call myself so much as a friend, but if I can help you

any way—if you want me to go for anybody, just say the word, and as I come home—I've only two minutes now—I'll go for him!"

Kyra got a glimmering of his meaning at last, and would have smiled if she had not been so sad.

"It is very good of you, Mr. Wicks," she said. "Yes, there is trouble, as you have seen; but it is not mine—"

"Oh," said Mr. Wicks, with evident disappointment.

"It is the trouble of some friends of mine."

"In there?" he said, nodding at the court. "Yes; I know. I've seen you there before. I—I pass here pretty frequently. I've seen him—"

Kyra started a little.

"Him?"

"Yes; the tall, dark fellow; the swell—"

"You would know him again?" asked Kyra, eagerly.

"Of course. There's nothing balmy about me, Miss Burns," he responded, as if rather wounded by the question.

Kyra looked puzzled for a moment, and considered; then she said, very quietly and slowly:

"You were kind enough to offer to help me, Mr. Wicks; therefore, I am sure that you will help my friends if you can. They are—looking for the gentleman you have seen. He has disappeared, gone off—" She hesitated and blushed, but Mr. Wicks promptly filled in the sentence for her.

"Gone off with the girl at the horse-dealer's!" he exclaimed, with an air of relief so intense as to be almost one of satisfaction. "What a slack-baked idiot I am! I never thought of her—"

"In what connection—" began Kyra; but Mr. Wicks went on, hurriedly, as if he were rather ashamed of something:

"It's *her*, of course! And you want to find him! They've heloped!" Mr. Wicks's aspirates were wont to go astray when he was excited. "A'tecs the thing, Miss Burns; take my word for it."

"A—what? I beg your pardon," said Kyra, feeling as if she were confronting an entirely strange language.

"I beg *yours*," said Mr. Wicks. "I mean a detective. No?" as Kyra shook her head. "Too public? Hem! let me see." His face grew grave with thought, and he thrust his hands deep into his pockets; then he looked up with an air of determination. "You leave it to me. Miss Burns. Of course, I haven't much spare time; but I know my way about, and I've got pals—friends at the bank—who will help me."

"Oh, but I cannot give you so much trouble," murmured Kyra.

Mr. Wicks's face glowed a brilliant scarlet.

"Trouble! *you* give me trouble! Oh!" He drew a long breath as if labouring under an emotion too great for words. "Trouble! Oh!"

With this enigmatical ejaculation, he raised his hat, set it on again with obvious indifference as to its levelness, and darted off with his watch in his hand.

That night at dinner, and wherever he met her, for months afterwards, Mr. Wicks regarded Kyra with a mysterious gesture, half nod, half shake of the head which would have amused Kyra if the subject with which it was connected had not been so terribly sad.

The days passed and Bessie did not come back nor did any tidings of her reach White Horse Lane. Kyra went there very often and sat beside the stricken father. He had sunk into quite an old man now, his business was neglected, the little house uncared for, and eloquent in its desolation of the desolation in the old man's heart. Kyra generally found him sitting by the table—the weather was now too cold for the seat under the elm, and he would not have sat there now in any weather, for the place was hateful to him, and his only desire was to hide himself from the eyes of his neighbours. He would look up when Kyra entered, shake his head sadly and would remain almost silent while she sat and talked to him.

"She'll never come back! I've lost my gel, my Bessie, miss!" was sometimes the only sentence he would speak during the whole of her visit.

And now the tap, tap! of the carpenter's hammer was only heard at intervals in the yard; for John Warden was more often absent than at his work. He would be away for weeks together, saying nothing of his destination, and returning with his worn face more worn, his heavy, dragging steps more heavy and weary. Kyra had no need to ask him, when he returned from these unknown wanderings, whether his quest had been successful. The despair in his sunken eyes told her plainly enough.

Sometimes, so interested was she in the great trouble of these two men, Kyra went nigh to forgetting her own trouble, the tragedy in her own life. It almost seemed as if the Kyra Jermyn of former days were a person who had existed in a dream only; and the Mary Burns who spent her days arrang-

ing and cataloguing intaglios and ancient gems for the expert, Mr. Sutton, were the real person.

But one evening a note was struck that aroused the long-forgotten past. They were at dinner at Danberry Square; Mr. Wicks was gazing at the unconscious Kyra with an expression of hopeless melancholy which caused the two Misses Robinson to nudge each other under the table. Mrs. Tonks was waiting in her usual state of coma for the potatoes; Mr. Sutton was absently twirling a knife as he was mentally calculating the value of his last deal; Mrs. Mumly was remarking to no one in particular that "the winter reely 'ad come," when Mr. Mumly remarked, apropos of nothing:

"What splendid chaps those fellows of ours are in West Africa. 'Pon my word, it makes you quite proud as there is such soldiers. Suppose you saw that account of the fight with the natives in the papers, Miss Robinson? The whole affair's only just published."

"I rarely read the papers," said Miss Robinson, as if her abstention were a virtue. "Is this anything special?"

"I should rather think so!" replied Mr. Mumly. "Just a 'andful of our men against a reg'lar mob of natives—and armed, properly armed, mind you; none of your bows and arrows and spears, but proper rifles and guns. Our chaps was hemmed in by 'em in a laager, I think they call it; and there they fought, hour after hour, until there was only a few of 'em left. But they beat the beggars off and held the place until help came. I see one of 'em has got the Victoria Cross. And he deserves it, too! Went out, single-handed, and brought in a young lieutenant who was wounded and being done for by the savages, a young fellow named Gordon—wonder whether he's any relation to the general? Shouldn't wonder. The officer who saved him was Captain Lance le—le—something or other."

Kyra had been listening silently and with interest, and the name struck her like a bolt out of the blue. She sat perfectly still, but she knew that the colour had rushed to her face and ebbed back again as suddenly, leaving her cheeks white.

"A Frenchman, by his name," said Miss Robinson.

"Oh, Lor', no!" returned Mr. Mumly. "He's English enough; there's lots of French-sounding names amongst the English. The paper's full of him and his 'eroism—I've got his name now. It's Captain Lance le Breton—that's it. Ah, sometimes we gentlemen in the city 'ave a 'ard time; but just think of what that young chap has gone through!"

His voice buzzed in Kyra's ears as he dilated on the theme. She raised her glass with a shaking hand and drank some water; and immediately dinner was over she went to her own room. But she could not remain there, and went down to the dining-room again, where Mr. Wicks and Mr. Mumly were smoking. They rose as she entered—they never faltered in their respect for her—and Mr. Mumly looked at his pipe apologetically.

"May I have the paper?" Kyra asked in a low voice; and Mr. Wicks sprang for it as a Newfoundland springs to save a drowning child.

"You read the account of that fight I was talking about, Miss Burns?" said Mr. Mumly. "Let me find it for you."

She forced herself to stand quite still while he folded the paper and stabbed the column with his finger; then she went back to her own room, and, when she had read the account, she sat, with the paper in her hand, her eyes fixed on the opposite wall, on which she saw the fight in all its details.

And Captain Lance le Breton, who had won his V. C. under circumstances which had made even a newspaper man enthusiastic, was her husband!

Slowly the colour stole into her pale face, a strange light glowed, star-like, in her lovely eyes, and her bosom rose and fell with the rapid, painful throbbing of her heart.

Her husband! Ah, but no! He was the husband of Kyra Jermyn, who had died in that horrible house on the dismal marshes!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A MONTH later Lance le Breton entered the smoking-room of the United Forces Club. It was pretty full at the time—an hour before dinner—and his appearance caused that kind of suppressed excitement which is permissible in the well-bred Englishman.

For the papers had not yet done with the little war at which Lance and Bertie had distinguished themselves, and much to his embarrassment, Lance had arrived in England to find himself a popular hero.

His portrait, very flattering, had appeared in the weekly illustrated journals in company with paragraphs which, wrong in every detail, assumed to set forth in glowing newspaperese his various exploits. But notwithstanding his popularity, his friends and fellow-officers thought a great deal of him, and there was something approaching a general move towards him.

as he entered the handsome and luxurious club-room. Lance responded to their greetings appropriately enough, but after a few minutes got away from the small crowd, and taking a chair in a dim and distant corner, got behind a newspaper and a cigarette; and the men who had welcomed him so warmly drew off, and, some of them, discussed him.

"Looks a bit off colour," said a major. "Had a roughish time, I should think."

"Why, of course!" said another major. "It hasn't been all beer and skittles. Bromton told me that it was the hottest thing *he'd* ever been in, and that Le Breton handled the pitch like the very devil himself. Of course it's left its mark on him. How many wounds was it?"

"I'm told that you can't put a finger on him without touching a scar," said the first major; "but it isn't wounds that makes a man look as Le Breton looks. I once knew a man—"

"The major's on his reminiscences!" said a young fellow, with good-natured cynicism.

"I was only going to say that I once knew a man who was so cut up that he was like—like a crimped cod; and the first thing he said, when the surgeons had done with him, was, 'Don't let my 'bacca get too dry!' and he was as cheerful as a blue-bottle ever after. Now, Le Breton would be just as chirpy if they hadn't left an ounce of blood in his body. He's an altered man. There's something on his mind;" and the major nodded and pursed his lips.

"Yes, he's changed, wonderfully changed. But 'something on his mind!'" echoed the young fellow who had chaffed the major. "Why, if ever a fellow was in luck's way, Le Breton is. He goes out to a two-penny half-penny war in a 'details' corps, gets his V. C., and is presented with a first-class cavalry troop—"

"Which he deserves," put in the major.

"Which he deserves. I agree. But there's luck as well as merit in it. And the luck doesn't stop there; it's been at work for him while he's been away, and he comes home to find both his cousins dead. Both, mind! Arthur was always a poor crock, and not likely to hang on; but who'd have thought that Edward would have caught this beastly influenza and joined the majority? He looked good enough for half a century more. And he might have married: it was just Le Breton's luck that he didn't! It's awfully sad and all that, but, dash it all! it's all in the day's work; we're all mortal, and if some of your relations have got to die, it's as

well that it should be those who stand between you and an earldom. Why, they say that out in that beastly place, 'Le Breton's luck' was a catch-word. It was always his company that dropped on the blacks and got their change out of them; it was always Le Breton who found water when the rest of the force was parched as peas, it was always—"

"Dry up; here's young Gordon!" said one of the men, warningly. "Don't let him hear you abusing Le Breton—"

"I wasn't abusing him!"

"Well, talking about him in anything but a complimentary fashion—or nothing but your blood will satisfy young Gordon."

So the subject was changed as Bertie came towards them. There was evidently nothing much on *his* mind; and, notwithstanding the terrible ordeal he had gone through, his smile was as boyish, his eyes as bright as they had been when he and Lance tramped side by side and messed together before the fighting began. As he came down the big room, with his light but firm step, he nodded to all and exchanged a laughing greeting with some.

"Come and sit down, Gordon?" "Dine at our table, will you?" "What do you say to bridge to-night?"

Bertie smiled in response to the various and heartily given invitations—he was a great favourite—but he shook his head and his eyes wandered round the room and over the group.

"Thanks: but I'm booked for to-night. Anyone seen Le Breton?"

The major nodded to the ante-room where Lance sat behind his paper and almost within hearing, and Bertie went off at once to him.

Lance looked up and nodded in the grave fashion which had become habitual with him, and Bertie laid a hand on Lance's shoulder before he spoke. The action was significant enough and was indicative of the warm affection that existed between them; for men are not demonstrative nowadays, and are not fond of even shaking hands.

"Come and have some dinner, Lance," said Bertie; and the tone of his voice was as eloquent of his love for the man as the touch of his hand.

"Yes: but not here, if you don't mind. It's—somewhat public, and talking's rather a bore. I ordered a chop or something of the kind at my rooms—"

"That's good enough," said Bertie.

The two men passed out, every eye following them, and in the street they attracted attention: the policeman pointed

out the Captain le Breton to the crossing sweeper who stands opposite the club, and the passers-by stopped and stared at the face which the illustrated papers had made so familiar to the curious public.

"Walk or ride?" asked Bertie.

"Oh, walk," said Lance, absently.

As absently he sat down to dinner at which the handy Spilkins, now honourably discharged, waited with the devotion to Lance which he had displayed all through the campaign; and as absently, with the same air of abstraction, Lance ate the plain, but admirably cooked, meal. Bertie, who knew his friend's mood so well, humoured it, not by a bored silence, but by a gentle strain of conversation; but when Spilkins had gone and Lance had reached for his old pipe, Bertie said, gently:

"What is it, Lance?"

Lance looked at him in silence for a moment.

"A letter from my uncle. I must go down there to-morrow."

Bertie nodded. "Of course: you were going, you know."

"Yes, to-morrow, or the day after," said Lance. They had only arrived in London two days previously, and they had had to report themselves. "But—I funk it, Bertie. It's the solid truth. I'm ashamed; but there it is. To face that poor old man with his two boys dead. To present myself—I, who ought to have been shot half a dozen times—as the heir—Great heaven! how will he be able to keep off exclaiming: 'They are dead: why are you alive?'"

Bertie was too wise to point out the morbid injustice of this; and he smoked his cigar in a silence which would have done credit to a much older man.

"Besides," Lance went on, but hesitated and frowned sadly at the fire, "the sight of the place will drive me mad. To think, only a few months—not a year ago—"

He stopped abruptly, as if he had suddenly remembered that he was not talking to himself, but had a listener.

Then Bertie spoke.

"Would it make it any easier if I came with you, old man?"

Lance turned to him eagerly, but checked himself and bit his lip.

"What a selfish beast I am," he said, with a short laugh. "I was actually about to accept your offer—to take you away from your mother."

"She knows I'm going," remarked Bertie, quietly. "It

was she who suggested it. Fact. Oh, there's nothing the *mater* would draw the line at where you're concerned. She'll even sacrifice her darling baby-boy, as you perceive."

"Lady Gordon is very good," said Lance, gratefully. "I'd like to have you—it's just on the cards that you'd be the means of saving me from going stark, staring mad at sight of the place—"

He stopped again, and Bertie leant forward and touched him on the knee.

"See here, old man," he said; "there's something more than the two deaths that makes it hard for you to go down there. Goodness knows, I don't want to know; but, if it would help you to tell me—if it would ease your mind— Do you think I don't remember the day you got leave and the way you were knocked over by something you read in the paper? I didn't ask you then; nor when you were down with the fever and raving like a lunatic did I listen. I haven't asked you since; but now—what is it, old man? See here; it *hurts* to look on and see you suffering and not be able to help you—to help you with even a word."

Lance laid his hand on the lad's shoulders and looked down at him.

"Bertie, there is a dark shadow over my life, a piece of bad luck, that has left its mark on me like the mark of one of those niggers' spears. But *they* only mark the flesh: my trouble scarred my heart, and it hurts still: it will hurt while I live: that's what I'm afraid of: and the sight of that place will wake up the pain and the smart of the old wound. No, stop here with your mother, my boy—"

Bertie rose and got a Bradshaw.

"There's a train at 11:30," he said. "We'll go down by that. I took the liberty of writing to Lord Ashleigh and asking him if I might come with you; and he was good enough to write and say he'd be glad to see me—at least, it was from Lady May—'any friend of yours,' she said. And so there you are, you know."

"Little May!" said Lance, almost to himself. "Little May!" Then he scowled at Bertie. "You're an obstinate young beggar," he said, with a shrug of his shoulders.

But Bertie understood: he had caught the look of gratitude that flashed behind the scowl.

"Oh, I may as well go down with you," he said in a casual way. "You'd be getting into some scrape or other, if I wasn't there to look after you."

CHAPTER XXXV.

LANCE and Bertie went down to Holmby by the 11:30.

They were met by the great carriage, and a full complement of servants, in black livery, who accorded Lance a respectful attention full of significance: for was he not the heir and their future master?

As they drove up to the vast place, Bertie, accustomed as he was to country seats, was impressed by its size and grandeur; but he was still more impressed, not to say startled, by the beautiful girl who came to the door and almost ran down the steps to welcome Lance. May's black dress served to set off her exquisite colouring, the gold in her hair and the sunlight in her eyes; her young face shone like a star; and Bertie envied Lance as he put his arm round the slim, graceful figure and kissed the soft, red lips.

"Oh, I am so glad you've come, Lance!" she said. "We've been expecting and longing for you! But how pale and thin you are! That dreadful little war! But, oh, Lance, I am so proud of you!" She gave him a little hug. Then she became conscious of Bertie's presence, and turned to him with a slight blush and a little flickering smile which made her face all the more charming. "How do you do, Mr. Gordon? It is very kind of you to come down with Lance, to—to so quiet a house. We seem to have known you quite well, for of course we've read of you in the papers, and Lance has written so much about you."

"That'll do, May," said Lance. "Mr. Gordon has quite a good enough opinion of himself already; and too much of that sort of thing is decidedly bad for him." But he smiled as he spoke, and laid his hand on Bertie's shoulder.

"Don't you believe him, Lady May," said Bertie, with gravity. "I am the victim of injustice. Modesty has been my drawback from my youth up, and, if I do not take care, will ultimately ruin me. No; of the two individuals you see before you it is Captain le Breton who suffers from vanity and vaingloriousness; and it is my chief mission in life to endeavour, by precept and example, to keep him from having a swelled head."

May answered this sally with a soft laugh and a twinkle of her bright eyes; and the two young people were friends in an instant.

Lance 1

1. Ashleigh was sit-

ting in the library, his arm-chair wheeled up close to the fire, his gouty leg supported by a rest; the hand he held out to Lance trembled, and Lance saw by the deep lines in the old man's face, and its pallor, how much he had suffered. For the moment neither man could speak; then, slowly releasing Lance's hand, the earl said in a voice he tried to keep steady:

"So you've come back, Lance? I'm glad. It's quite right you should do so. I've been waiting anxiously for you. We little thought when you went away that—that you would come back as you have done, that you would only find me and May to welcome you. My boys—" His voice broke. "But God's will be done; and I ought to be thankful that I have you left. It would have been hard lines if the title and the estate had gone to that other fellow"—"that other fellow" was the next heir, an individual particularly obnoxious to the poor old man—"that would have broken me up altogether. But the fact that you'll come after me helps me to bear the loss of Ned and Arthur; for you are of the right sort, my boy; a good soldier and a sportsman, and you'll do the right thing by the title and the old place. We won't say anything more about the boys—I'll try and forget my sorrow, now you've come home—for it's 'home,' Lance, to you, as much as it is to me—and I don't want to make it a wretched one: God knows it's been wretched enough lately. It wouldn't be fair to you to make the house a place of mourning. You're looking rather seedy, Lance; but I know you've had a rough time of it. I'm proud of you—but there! blood always tells. I said that if you had your chance you'd make your mark, and you have. Yes, we're proud of you; and as for May, she's quite insufferable about your grand doings. She's had a bad time, too, of course; and I'm glad, for her sake, that you have come back. You'll cheer her up. Your Aunt Adderley is here off and on, to look after May; but she's away just at present—the Lord be praised!"

He expressed his gratitude with a touch of his old whimsicality.

"And so you've brought young Gordon down with you. That's right. His father was a great pal of mine, and I shall be glad to have the boy. Send him in to me presently. And you've got the V. C., eh, Lance? I'd sooner have it than the Garter; and they'll have to give you that: they can't help it, d—n them! I'll hobble in to dinner to-night. Tell Williams to let us have some of that old port. He's a stingy beast and never gives it to me—b'lieve he keeps it for himself. We must have a flare-up to-night. And look here, Lance,

you'll have to take over the command here now. I am too tired and lazy. Yes; you'll have to run the show and look after me and May and the place and the game. I hope you will find something fit to ride; neither of the boys was much of a sportsman, poor chaps, and Arthur never went near the stables. Get what's necessary—but there, you know what to do, thank God! That comforts me. You'll make a better Ashleigh than any of them. Send the boy in to me."

Bertie must have been satisfied with his welcome, for he came out looking rather grave but with a softened light in his eyes, which had a suspicion of moisture in them. That night the gloom was lifted from the great place, and the dinner was almost a merry one. The earl hobbled in on Lance's arm; the table shone with the famous gold plate which had been served at royal visits; lights were gleaming in all the candelabra, and the magnificent room looked splendid in the soft illumination; but to Bertie the most splendid thing of all was the beautiful young girl who sat at the head of the table and presided with a gentle dignity which would have become a queen. The servants were all on the *qui vive*; and there were tears in old Williams's eyes as the earl raised his glass, in which the Ashleigh port flashed a ruby light, and drank Lance's health.

Bertie came out splendidly, and presently the earl found himself laughing, actually laughing, at some of the boy's stories. Nobody could tell a story like Bertie, and May leant forward with a delicious smile on her face as he narrated some of the humorous incidents of the campaign which had made Lance famous. Wine flowed freely in the servants' hall that night, and Lance's health was drunk there as heartily as it had been in the dining-room: for he had always been popular with the establishment, and one and all felt that he would prove a worthy successor to the old earl.

Lance fought with his life's sorrow and succeeded in, at least, concealing it; and smiled as the Spartan boys smiled, while the fox of undying love, of bitter bereavement, was tearing at his vitals. After dinner he helped the earl to his room. "God bless you, my boy; I am glad He spared you to me!" was the old man's good-night. Then he went downstairs and joined May and Bertie in the billiard-room, where they were engaged in a game which was more of a circus than billiards; for May was often unable to make her shot for laughing at some of Bertie's quaint comicalities.

In simple truth, the boy was one of those light-hearted and tender-hearted individuals who make friends and win

affection at sight; and although he had been at Holmby only for a few hours, he had already become, as it were, one of the family. It was he who lit May's candle—for that abomination, gas, was unknown at Holmby—and he held May's hand for an unnecessary length of time when he said good-night, standing and regarding Lance with an envy and despair, which was not altogether assumed, as May put her arms round Lance's neck and kissed him in sisterly fashion.

Lance had a cigar with Bertie, but before it was finished Lance had grown grave and absent-minded, as usual; and when he had sent Bertie off to bed, he put on his hat and coat, and went out. His slow steps went in the direction of the Elms, and he stood and looked at it in the moonlight with an aching heart.

The place was deserted, and there was a "To Let" board by the gate. It was as empty as his heart. He could scarcely realise that his dear love had lived there; the whole thing seemed a dream—one of those sad dreams which haunt a man through all his life. He marvelled, as he turned away and went to the stile, where he had listened to Kyra's strange proposal, how men could ever forget the women they had loved, how they could ever turn to another.

He lay awake a greater part of that night, dwelling on the bitter-sweet of the past, and when he slept he dreamt that she was still alive and—alas! alas!—lying in his arms.

But on the morrow, though he came down haggard and grave, he fought against his sadness and tried to fall into line with Bertie and May, who were beginning the day with all the brightness of youth unshadowed by grief.

"A ride's the thing," said Bertie at breakfast. "It's your duty, you know, Lady May, to show me the lions. You must have a ruined castle, or something of the sort, in the neighbourhood—every place has, you know—and we can go and look at it; and you can tell me its history, while Lance smokes a cigar and thinks of the War Office. He is going to give the War Office something to think about him. Of course you know that he's making for the commandership-in-chief; and the disgusting thing is, that he's likely to get it, because, you see, he's a born soldier and has got brains. That's the difference between us. I'm a born soldier, but I'm also a born idiot; so I shall be a colonel with a red nose and a grievance, while Lance is swaggering at head-quarters."

They had found some decent horses in the stables, and Bertie put May—heavens! how delicious she looked in her riding-habit!—on to her mare. He and May rode side by

side, while Lance, absorbed in his dead love, brought up the rear.

There were no ruins, but they rode to the nearest town—to Benstead: and what memories it awakened in Lance's mind, what stabs it gave to Lance's heart!—and Bertie's sallies brought the smile to May's lips and made the dull, grey place quite cheerful in her eyes; for what girl with young life running in her veins could be dull in the presence of that vivacious youth, who mingled mirth with tenderness, and enlivened by his humour and vivacity every mile of the way?

Lord Ashleigh dined in his room that night, but Lance went up to him afterwards, and they chatted like father and son; and the earl gave Lance some particulars about the vast estate which would be his.

"And before very long, Lance," he said. "I shall make a fight for it, of course; but the death of the two boys has been a nasty knock. I should like to see you settled before I go, if you can manage it. I don't know whether there is any one—"

"There is no one, sir," said Lance, shaking his head and gazing at the fire moodily.

"I am sorry," said the earl. "And yet—" He paused and shifted his gouty leg. "I am half afraid of saying what's in my mind. And yet I don't know why I should be. You and I can have only one thought—the good of the estate. That's the worst of it. You won't find it all beer and skittles being the Earl of Ashleigh. If the boys had lived, you could have done as you darned well pleased, and could have married where you liked. But you can't now. You'll want a suitable wife, a woman you'll be proud to see at the head of your table. Oh, I'm not nervous about it; I'm not afraid that you'd do a mean thing. D—n it all, no! You wouldn't marry beneath you. I'm not nervous about it. There's only one thing I'm nervous about—and that's May. You see, when I join the majority, she'll be rather badly off. I haven't been able to save much money—both the boys were expensive—and she'll not only be poor, but alone and unprotected. If—But we won't speak of it yet. She's pretty, bless her heart! She's like her mother, thank God! She'll do well enough, but if I could see her settled before I go— She's always been very fond of you, Lance. Thinks there's no one like you. And, begad! I don't think she's far wrong! If you're not entangled— But we won't say anything more about it to-night."

And Lance, sitting with bowed head over the fire, winced, as if he felt a cold hand closing over his heart. And yet, why

not? May was young, beautiful, and was fond of him. He would have to marry; it was inevitable: the heir to an earldom must marry: it is part of his duty to his title and his estate; and if he must marry, where could Lance find a more suitable life-companion than pretty, exquisite May? He thought of it as he smoked his cigar in the corner of the billiard-room while May and Bertie played a laughing and noisy shell-out; and he looked at her, as a man looks at the girl who has been proposed to him as a suitable wife. Could he bury the past deep enough to marry anyone? Could he bring himself to forget the girl whose beauty and charm had won his heart—aye, and had kept it, though she had passed beyond the grave?

As the days passed, they grew brighter and more full of sunlight, for Bertie and May, at any rate. They were always together, singing songs in the drawing-room—amongst his other accomplishments the incomparable Bertie possessed a light tenor voice—they rode far and wide, they walked about the gardens and over the estate; they were always laughing and talking together, from early morn to frosty eve; for when the frost came, they skated together on the mere below the Hall. Of course, Lance was always, or nearly always, with them; but he acted as a Greek chorus only, as a chaperon whose presence was scarcely noticed. And yet, that is hardly fair; for May was always conscious of his presence, and always turned to him and brought him into the conversation when it was possible to do so. She treated him as a young girl treats a favourite brother, and was always ready—alas! too ready—to proffer her lips for his brotherly kiss. She was never shy with him, but she was very often shy with Master Bertie, who sometimes dropped his air of raillery and light persiflage, and, at times, grew almost as grave as Lance himself. At these times May grew a little cold, and, so to speak, sheered off.

It was on one of these occasions, when May had become more shy than usual, and had taken refuge in her own room, that Lance found Bertie sitting alone and thoughtful in the smoking-room.

“Where’s May?” asked Lance.

“She’s gone upstairs,” said Bertie, in a melancholy voice. “I say, Lance, don’t you think I’d better clear out? I’ve been here an unconscionable time, and I don’t want my port-manteau placed on the steps with a firm but respectful intimation from Williams that the train starts at 10:30.”

“Oh, you’re all right,” said Lance. “My uncle likes you

and would be sorry if you were to go. And May, too, would miss you."

"Do you think she would?" enquired Bertie, with suppressed eagerness. "I don't know why she should. She's got you, you know. You're everybody here; and I—well, I'm only a casual visitor."

"Don't talk rot," said Lance. "We should all miss you. You needn't think of going unless you want to go."

"Want to go!" Bertie almost groaned. "If you knew how much I wanted to stay—"

"Well, stay then!" responded Lance, curtly. "I'm glad enough to have you, Heaven knows, if you have nothing better to do—"

"Oh, I've nothing better to do," said Bertie, emphatically. "I could go on doing this all my life, and shouldn't think of asking for a ticket of leave. I've never been so happy since I can remember."

He sighed portentously and lit another cigarette.

A man less absorbed than Lance would have seen whither Bertie was drifting; and yet, perhaps, that is scarcely fair, for Lance was well aware of Bertie's capacities for flirting, and that the boy always made love to every pretty woman he met, as if it were his absolute duty to do so. But Lance was not thinking of Bertie so much as of himself and the question that haunted him all day long: Could he so far forget the past as to ask, without loss of honour, for May? It was quite certain that he could never love her with all his heart, as she deserved to be loved: his heart felt dead within him. But he had a very warm affection for her, with which he tried to persuade himself she might be satisfied; he cared for her more than he could possibly care for any other woman; and he knew that if she accepted him, he could devote his life to her as fervently and completely as if he loved her with that passionate exaltation which Kyra had inspired. He went about the place thoughtfully, trying to grapple with the problem: and, of course, the old earl watched him anxiously; for the father wanted to see the darling of his heart provided with a protector before his hour came.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

ONE afternoon, Lance and May were out for a walk—Bertie had, very much against his will, been compelled to remain in the house to answer a sheaf of invitations and to apologise for broken acceptations—and on returning from one of the dis-

tant farms, where Lance had been received with an affectionate respect which had touched him, they passed the Elms. It was the first time that they had done so in each other's company, and, as they both glanced at the deserted house, May said, in a low voice and with a sigh:

"Poor Kyra! Were you not very shocked, Lance, when you heard of it?"

Strangely enough, Kyra's death had not been mentioned hitherto: one shrinks from speaking of infinitely sad things. Lance felt a choking in his throat, and his "Yes" was almost inaudible.

"We have never spoken of her, have we, Lance?" said May. "It makes my heart ache whenever I think of her. It seems incredible that one so young and so beautiful, so—so far above others, should be dead, should have died so suddenly. You know, I saw her the morning that she left here, and she looked perfectly well."

"Where was she going?" asked Lance, in a low voice.

"I do not know. She did not tell me. I tried to learn all about it when I saw her death announced in the paper; but there was no one to ask; the Froytes did not come back to the Elms."

"Did not come back? Why?" asked Lance, his head bowed, his brows knit.

"I do not know. There was a sale, and the place was shut up and left as you see it. It was said that they went abroad, that Mrs. Froyte's health had broken down under the shock. Of course, when I say that I don't know where poor Kyra went, I mean that I do not know to whom she went. She died at a place called Heydon, as you know. I gathered from what she said to me that she was going to take some kind of—of situation, though father said that that was nonsense, because he knew that Mr. Jermyn was a very rich man."

"No; he died poor," said Lance, gravely. "I think you are right, and that she was going to a situation."

Something in his voice, in the pallor of his face, from which the flush produced by their walk had departed, caused May to look at him curiously.

"You liked her very much, Lance?" she said, in a low voice. "You were always talking and writing of her."

"Yes; I—I liked her very much, May," he said.

Should he tell her of his unfortunate love for Kyra? He certainly could not ask May to be his wife without telling her. But he could say nothing of the marriage, for his promise still held good; his bond with Kyra was sealed by the hand of

death. And May walked beside him in silence, in the silence that invites a confidence; and, looking at her steadily, he said:

"May, I want to tell you something. I loved Kyra."

The colour rose to May's face, then slowly faded.

"I—I thought so, Lance; but I was not sure. Oh, I am so sorry, so sorry!"

"Yes; I loved her," he said.

"Did—did she know it?" May asked, in a still lower voice.

Lance hesitated for a moment. Did Kyra know it? He had never told her so; he could honestly reply in the negative.

"She did not know it," he said, hoarsely. "I should not have told you now, May, but that I thought I ought to do so."

"Why?" she asked, with a faint surprise.

"Because I am going to ask you to marry me, May," he said, very gently, very gravely.

The colour came to her face again and she looked at him quickly and then away from him, and her bosom rose and fell.

"Are you startled, dear?" he asked. "Have I been too sudden? If so, you must forgive me. I can quite understand your surprise; we have been like brother and sister, and it may seem strange to you that I should want a closer and dearer relationship. But, May, you must know that I am fond of you, that I have always been fond of you; and—and if you will trust yourself to me, I will try and make you happy; I will devote my life to the endeavour."

She was still silent, and her head drooped so that he could not see her eyes: and it is by a woman's eyes that a man learns whether his suit will be accepted or not.

"See, dear," he went on, with a grave earnestness; "this is too important a matter for you to answer without due consideration; it's the most important moment of your life."

"And of yours, too, Lance," she murmured, with a swift glance at him.

"I'm not thinking of myself, May," he said. "Your life and future are of more importance than mine."

"Lance!" She shot another glance at him, a glance of surprise this time. "And you the next ear! I am only a girl."

"One in a thousand, a million," he said, warmly enough. "At any rate, I count your life as more precious than I can say; and God knows I would not mar it by any selfish wish of mine. If
to me, May, I can say this,
to you, to guarding you

against every ill wind that blows, of shielding you, as far as man may, from every sorrow."

She walked beside him without saying a word for a moment or two; then she said almost in a whisper:

"Do you still love her, Lance?"

His brows came together and his head drooped still lower; but he raised it and looked at her steadily.

"She is dead, May. Do you think that I should wrong you by allowing any shadow of the past to come between us? Can you not trust me?"

"Yes, Lance," she replied, looking at him as steadily as he had looked at her. "Any and every woman could trust you: I know that."

"Then do so, dear," he said. "It is not fair to use any argument but that of my affection for you; but may I say that if you can give yourself to me you will make not only me happy but your father."

"I know," she said, gently. "But should I make you happy, Lance?"

"Yes," he answered; and he thought that he spoke the truth. For how could any man be unhappy with so sweet and pure a girl as May as his wife? Surely he would forget, in her loving arms, that terrible past, that great sorrow which had shadowed his life. In the sunshine of her love that shadow would melt away; surely he had every right to the conviction. "You will make me very happy and very proud, May," he said.

He put out his hand as he spoke and took hers, and she let it remain in his for a moment or two, then she withdrew it and slipped it in her muff. He had not spoken a word of love to her; and, young and inexperienced as she was, she was aware of it.

"Give me—give me a little time, Lance," she said. "I want to think it all over. It has taken me by surprise, for, though I like you—oh, you know how fond I am of you!—and I should like to make you happy—Lance, do you think I could teach you to forget Kyra?" she broke off, with a wistful eagerness, a troubled doubt.

"Yes," he answered again, and honestly. "No man could take you for his wife without loving you. And, May, there is this that I must say: if you do not marry me, I shall never ask another woman."

She caught her breath, and her hands clasped each other in her muff. Before she could respond—if, indeed, she intended

doing so—Doctor Graham rode round the corner and greeted them.

"Glad to see you back, Captain le Breton," he said. "I was coming up to the Hall to pay my respects, but I have been tremendously busy. We are all very proud of your exploits. I want to see that Victoria Cross, so perhaps Miss May will ask me to dinner some night."

"I will, if you are good," said May. "Why not come to-night?"

"Unfortunately I can't. I am up to my neck in work. By the way, do you know where I can get the key of the Elms? Excuse my abruptness, but I am behind time. A friend of mine thinks the place will suit him, and has asked me to give him the dimensions of the rooms. He would communicate with the Froytes; but I haven't the least notion where they are. Of course you heard of that poor girl's death, Le Breton?"

Lance set his teeth hard, and May went pale.

"Very sudden, and in a sense inexplicable," said Doctor Graham, frowning, and rubbing his chin irritably. "There was nothing organically wrong with her, that I'll answer for; and I can't understand her sudden collapse. There must have been some shock, some immediate cause. I had half an idea of running down to Essex and seeing the doctor; but I'm the hardest-worked man in the British Isles. And what would have been the use? But I was immensely interested in her case. She was such a beautiful girl, and so altogether charming. Oh, we doctors have hearts, Miss May, though we're generally believed to get on without 'em! It's a great pity we can't! I don't like being worried by this young lady's death, any more than you like having neuralgia, Lady May."

"I never had it!" May declared, indignantly. "I never have anything, you know, doctor."

"Sorry! Beg pardon!" he said. "Then there's another thing that keeps the thing hanging in my mind: I gave Mrs. Froyte a very powerful medicine—well, to put it bluntly, a poison—"

Lance looked up sharply with a tightening of his lips, and May drew her breath painfully. Doctor Graham nodded grimly in response to their unuttered fears.

"Yes; I do. I think it's not at all unlikely that an accident occurred. A larger dose than I proscribed would have caused death—"

Lance strode forward and gripped the doctor's bridle.

"Do you mean to say that you think—suspect— What is it you mean?" he said, hoarsely.

Doctor Graham regarded him gravely.

"I think just what I said; but as to suspect— Ah, well, that's going too far! Anyway, I've nothing but the merest surmise. I sent for a copy of the certificate, and it was perfectly in order. The local doctor had been attending her for some time past, and, of course, would have detected anything wrong. Oh, no, I've no grounds for my suspicions; besides, where was the motive? Miss Jermyn was poor; she was going to take a situation. No, no, there is nothing in it; but it only shows you, Lady May, what impressionable and nervy men we doctors can be: some of us. But there, I can't stay gossiping all day while some of my patients will be dying—or recovering—without me."

May glanced at Lance as the doctor rode away.

"You don't think there is anything—"

Lance shook his head.

"No," he said. "If so I should go mad; I could not rest until I had discovered the truth."

No more was said on the subject; but Lance, though he tried to forget the doctor's words, was haunted by them. When they reached the Hall they found Bertie walking up and down the terrace with a cigarette between his lips, his coat collar up, and a harassed expression on his usually blithe face.

"Oh, here, I say, I'm precious glad you've come back!" he exclaimed, but in a hushed voice, and with a cautious glance towards the Hall.

"What's the matter?" asked May, smiling at his rueful visage.

"There's a lady, an old lady, arrived while you've been gone, and she's been putting me through my paces; asking me all sorts of things about 'my past,' and how often I go to church, and whether I wear flannels—"

"It's Aunt Adderley come back," said May, laughing. "Oh, poor young man!"

"Yes; I can take any sympathy you've got to dispense, Lady May," responded Bertie, solemnly. "I've had a devil— an exceedingly bad time. Ah, here she is! I'm going to off it if you'll allow me!"

He turned and fled as Lady Adderley, with a huge shawl over her head, came from the hall.

"May, is that you? Come in at once. This cold, damp air is enough to give you your death," she said, severely.

"Oh, here you are, Lance! I'm glad to see you, for I suppose as you are home again, that horrid war is over. I hear that you have behaved yourself, and have received a medal or something of the kind; but I trust that you will not forget that peace is more glorious than war; and that you are duly thankful for the kindly Providence which has saved you from the bullet and the—er—I forget the name of the weapon the poor savages used—while other, and no doubt worthier, men were laid low?"

"Yes, certainly; quite so, aunt," responded Lance, rather absently, and he kissed the cheek extended to him.

"I've been telling that young man my opinion of a soldier's life, and warning him against its many temptations; and I have reason to believe that my poor words, dropped, I trust, in season, will not be without fruit."

"Bertie's a good enough boy; yes, aunt," said Lance, as he passed her on his way to the library.

He found a Bradshaw, and looked up Heydon. He could catch an early train in the morning. There might be nothing to discover when he got there, but go he must; and he would not leave the place until he had satisfied himself that there was no cause for the doctor's vague suspicions.

Lady Adderley's presence did not tend to increase the geniality of the company which she favoured, and Bertie at first looked rather rueful when Lance announced that he had to go away for a day or two.

"Take care of May," he said to Bertie, and Bertie responded promptly:

"Rather! But she'll be well taken care of by that old woman, you bet your life, and I shall have a sinecure. She watches us as a tabby cat watches a couple of mice," he added, with a groan. "But I'll do my best, Lance. Where are you going, old man?"

"On some private business," Lance replied, gravely.

"Oh, all right; I'm not curious; but if you want me, you know—"

Lance left soon after breakfast the next morning. When he reached Heydon, the dreary marshes were rendered more hideous than usual by a sleety rain, through which the lonely house loomed grimly and gloomily. It was empty and locked up; and, after gazing at it for some minutes with a silent anguish, Lance made his way to Doctor Marshall, who, he was informed, was the only doctor in the place.

Doctor Marshall was in, for a wonder. He was a prematurely aged man, with cavernous eyes and hollow cheeks, and

he punctuated his sentences with the dry cough which was peculiar to that locality. He listened to Lance's questions with an air of patient resignation; for he wanted to bolt a cup of tea and be off to his patients again.

"Oh, yes, I remember the case; or, rather, I should say, I know of it," he said; "for I was away at the time, and my place here was filled by a *locum tenens*, a decent young fellow, though nothing of a genius. Cause of death was failure of the heart. It is not unusual in the insane—"

Lance started and gripped the chair by which he was standing.

"Insane!" he echoed. "She was not insane!"

"Well, well! perhaps not in the ordinary acceptation of the word. But she was hysterical and subject to hallucinations. I've the notes of the case here." He found them and ran over them in brief, curt sentences. "Very sad case, very! Wish I'd been at home—"

"Where can I find the doctor who took your place—who attended her?" asked Lance, huskily.

Doctor Marshall shook his head.

"I'm afraid you'd find it difficult to do so. He took a berth in the West Indies and started last week."

"And the nurse—there was a nurse?" said Lance, with a sense of striking at a stone wall.

"I don't know who she was. Came from one of the nursing-homes, probably; but Gills told me that she was a very capable and experienced woman. Of course, I don't know the reason or the object of your enquiries; but I can assure you that you have no cause to suspect that there was anything—well, crooked—about the death."

It was all Lance could get. He went from the doctor's to the desolate, lonely church-yard, and stood beside the tombstone which recorded Kyra's death; stood with bowed head and hands gripping each other almost painfully. There it was, deeply cut in the stone: "Kyra Jermyn; aged 22." And yet, he could not realise her death any more fully than he had been able to realise it before. He turned away with a sigh that was almost a groan, and went up to London by the evening train with a vague idea of finding the nurse, or, better still, one of the Froytes. He could not concentrate his thoughts on May until he had satisfied himself that there was no mystery, no suspicion of foul play, connected with the death of his lost love. His heart could not hope for rest until he was so satisfied.

Meanwhile, during Lance's absence, Bertie was having a de-

sidedly bad time of it. Aunt Adderley proved a terrible personage—a kind of dragon, from whose penetrating and ever-watchful eyes there was no escaping. There was no more circus in the billiard-room, where she carried her knitting and criticised the play of the two young people; there were no more strolls on the terrace after dinner, for May was ordered to the piano and kept there until bed-time; there were no more rides over the hills, powdered with snow, for Aunt Adderley sternly remarked that it was no weather for riding; and when they went out in the carriage, she sat beside May, enveloped in furs and looking, as Bertie said to himself, like an Esquimau mummy.

And May, too, what had come over her? he asked himself; for where were now her gibes and gambols, and her flashes of merriment? The "fellow of infinite jests," of brightly flashing eyes and smiling lips was silent and preoccupied, almost sad, indeed. He could not ask her, for Aunt Adderley took precious good care that they should not be alone together for more than a minute or two.

Poor Bertie, in love, genuinely in love for the first time in his life, was on the point of telling Lance's valet to pack his things, and taking his departure, when the god of love mercifully came to his aid.

Bertie had proposed to drive Lady Adderley and May to Benstead, in the fond and fervent hope that the elder lady might fall asleep and so give him a word or two with May, and the phaeton had been ordered, and was, indeed, at the door, when Lady Adderley's maid came down to the hall and informed Bertie that her ladyship had a bad headache and that, therefore, the drive must be abandoned.

Bertie nodded, and frowned, and sighed, and May, coming slowly down the stairs—why didn't she run, as she used to do? he asked himself—found him kicking the logs in the fireplace with a disconsolate air. But at sight of her lovely face his own cleared, and as if under the influence of a sudden resolution, and in a matter-of-fact tone, he said:

"Lady Adderley's not coming: got the toothache. Awfully sorry! Shall miss her so much, don't you know, Lady May!"

"Oh, but I had better not go," said May, doubtfully.

"Oh, but you must; I heard you say that you'd got to go to the dress-maker's. That's a solemn engagement, you know; more solemn than an engagement of marriage. Besides, where's the harm? You and I used to drive together—"

"That was before Aunt Adderley came back," said May, demurely.

Bertie turned his head and murmured something about Aunt Adderley which May did not catch.

"Oh, come along!" he said aloud. "Look what a lovely day it is; and—and it would be a sin to miss it. Besides, you're getting quite off colour, shut up all day."

He edged towards her as he spoke, and May found herself hoisted into her place by his strong hand.

"I don't think we'll want you," he said in so low a voice to the groom that May did not hear him, and was not aware that the servant had been left behind until she happened to turn round some time later.

Bertie, drawing a long breath, as with a sense of freedom after much thralldom, took the reins and spun the horses over the hard road, and after they had gone a mile or two, drew another such breath, so obviously that May could not fail to notice it.

"You seem relieved about something," she said, demurely.

"That's so," he responded. "It's Lady Adderley."

"She's my aunt, Mr. Gordon," May reminded him, severely.

"That's all right," he said, apologetically. "Sorry if I've offended you, Lady May; but—clinking mare this off one, isn't she?—but I wish she wasn't. Terrible nuisance, relations. I had an uncle once—but it wouldn't interest you."

"How do you know?" demanded May.

"Well, because I can't flatter myself that anything concerning me would interest you, Lady May."

May looked straight before her; and, of course, Bertie went on—went on in the despairful voice which a man only uses to a woman, and which, strangely enough, women like to hear.

"Wish I could. Of course, I'm of no account—a kind of blue upright"—the blue upright is an ephemeral fly known to anglers—"here to-day and forgotten to-morrow; but I—I—hope when I've gone you won't quite forget me."

"But you are not going," said May, with seeming indifference, but with a real dismay which smote her with remorse and a sense of wrong-doing.

"Oh, yes, I am," he said, nodding his head emphatically at the mare. "What's the use of staying? I should only be all the more unhappy."

"I can't imagine you unhappy," remarked May, cheerfully, though her heart was going nineteen to the dozen.

"Oh, can't you?" he retorted. "That's where you make

the mistake. I'm fearfully unhappy. You see— Oh, Lady May, I can't keep it in any longer! I'm in love with you. It's playing it awfully low down to get you out here with me alone and telling you, but I can't help it. That old woman—I beg your pardon; Lady Adderley—hasn't left me any other chance. I love you with all my heart and soul— Whom? What are you pulling for, you silly!" this was to the admiration of course. "I love you, and have loved you—"

"Oh, stop, stop!" said poor May, her face crimson on moment and pale the next. "I—I don't want you to say any more."

"Why not? I can't help it if you don't. I must say it or—or choke," he went on, almost roughly. "You're all the world to me. I shall never love anyone else— Steady, you idiot!—I shall be unutterably wretched and miserable if you don't take pity on me. Oh, May, dear—I always think of you as 'May;' forgive me—don't tell me you don't care for me; *don't!*"

May turned her face away: it was very pale, and her eyelids quivered as was their wont when she was much moved.

"I'm—I'm going to marry Lance," she said, slowly, in a still, toneless voice.

Bertie pulled up the high-mettled horses on their haunches and looked at her; then he stared straight before him into vacancy.

"Lance," he said, at last. "Why—of course, of course."

He caught his breath and bit his lip.

"Yes—just so. Lance. I—I wish you every happiness Lady May. And, by Heaven, you'll get it. There's—there's no one like Lance! He's one of the best—no, he's *the* best. There's—there's no chance for anyone against him. And—and so you're going to marry Lance! What a—a—fool I've been not to have seen it! And yet—yet—"

"I'm sorry," said May, almost inaudibly.

He turned his face to her. It was working with the agony of disappointment and unrequited love: and there is no worse going, believe me.

"That's all right," he said, hoarsely. "Don't you pity me. I'd—I'd rather love you and lose you than not love you. You don't understand? Perhaps I don't myself, but I know what I feel. I shall never care for anybody else—never! But don't you worry about me. Lance! Dear old Lance! Yes that's all right. You know he saved my life? Well—I can stand a lot from him. Lance—yes; that's all right. The best fellow—"

They were silent until they reached the town.

May got down at the draper's, and Bertie got down also to stretch his legs. He felt as if he were bruised all over, as if life were finished for him, at any rate for the present. May was going to marry Lance. Oh, yes, it was all right, but—but oh, the misery of it!

While he was standing by the horses, a motor car came by, whizzing and spitting. The present writer has nothing to say against the motor car. Neither has he anything to say against death and the taxes. Like the motor car, they are inevitable; but few will be bold enough to assert that they are pleasant to look upon.

The horses, overfed, underworked, started at this product of our effete civilisation, and, wrenching their heads from the hands of the man who held them, made a bolt for it.

Bertie sprang at them, and got hold of them; but, in doing so, lost his foothold and went down under them.

At this moment May came out of the shop. She saw the catastrophe, and, losing her head, ran towards the mixture of horses and man, and, quite unconsciously, screamed:

"Bertie! Bertie!"

He was on his feet before her voice had died away, and, of course, he heard it.

His face went crimson and white as he stretched out his hand to her; for it looked as if she were going to faint.

"It's all right, May—Lady May," he said, his voice broken by his agitation, which reflected hers. "I assure you it's all right."

She was leaning on his arm, almost on his breast, and her eyes, which had closed, looked up at his.

"Bertie!" she breathed again.

Then she seemed to remember. The blood rushed to her face, leaving it a deathly pallor.

"I—I—I—thought you—you were hurt!" she murmured.

"Oh, no, I'm all right," he said, averting his eyes.

He lifted her to her seat and they drove home—in silence.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"I do hope you are not going to be ill," said Mr. Sutton to Kyra in an injured tone. "You're looking pale and thin." He regarded the slim, graceful figure as if he had not noticed it before, as indeed he probably had not. "I suppose you'll say you're overworked: as if anybody could be overworked at such pleasant and delightful employment as ours! Why, I

could sit up all night at it—and I do very often get out of bed and look over some catalogues. But there, if you want another holiday, say so—say so!” he wound up, with a sigh.

“No, no,” said Kyra, smiling at his air of resignation. “I am all right; I don’t want a holiday, and I’m not overworked; but I haven’t slept very well lately”—how could she sleep when she was haunted by the shadow of the deed she had done at Benstead church, by the reflection that Lance le Breton, the hero of the hour, was her husband? Then, again, she was very much distressed by the uncertainty which surrounded poor Bessie’s fate—“and I feel rather tired sometimes.”

“Sleep? Why can’t you sleep? I always can: soon as my head’s on my pillow: that’s the worst of women; they’re full of fads and fancies.”

But though he made a show of cynical grumpiness he continued to watch her covertly, and one morning, as Kyra sat over a collection of stones she was arranging, her aching head in her hands, her eyelids drooping pensively, he came in, and, with a grunt, said:

“You’d better go and pack your bag; we’ve got to go into the country. Don’t really want to go,” he mumbled to himself, “but it will do her good, I suppose: strange! How anyone can be the better for tramping about frosty country roads when they can stay in London, in a properly warmed and ventilated room, in a museum, for instance, I can’t imagine.”

Kyra, however, was of a different opinion, for she raised her head with a sudden brightening of the eyes.

“Oh, I’m glad!” she said in a tone of relief. “It is some time since we went into the country, and I think London is getting on my nerves.”

“Shouldn’t have any,” he grunted. The old gentleman himself was a bundle of nerves. “They’re silly things: thank Heaven, they’re mostly confined to women. We start tomorrow morning from Paddington at ten o’clock. You’d better rest for the remainder of to-day.”

“Where are we going?” asked Kyra; but he had flitted out of the room before her question could reach him, and she put away the gems and went home to Danberry Square. As Mr. Sutton had said, she would be wise to rest for the afternoon, and she went up to her room, and after a time managed to snatch some sleep. That evening, after dinner, Mr. Wicks approached her as she was seating herself at the piano, and, with a cautious glance on either side, bent forward and whispered mysteriously:

“What should you say if I said that I’d a clue?”

Kyra started; she had not been thinking of Bessie at the time.

"Hush!" he hissed. Someone is coming: we must not be overheard. Yes; I've got a clue. Mind, I don't say it's a strong one; but it may lead—it may lead! Anyhow, I'm on his track, Miss Burns, though he little thinks it. Hush!" he broke off, as Mrs. Tonks sailed in; and, with a melodramatic nod, he slid back to his accustomed seat behind the screen, from which he now and again peeped at Kyra with a significant raising of his brows.

When Kyra reached Paddington a few minutes before the appointed time, she found Mr. Sutton awaiting her, his diminutive figure with its long, white hair flitting up and down the platform.

"Wonder why all women run it so close?" he grumbled. But he found time to buy her a book at Smith's stall; though he remarked, as he gave it to her: "Stupid things, novels. Great waste of time, reading 'em: nothing in 'em ever happens in real life. And it's all novels and nothing else nowadays. I'd wager my life that there isn't a single book on intaglios on the stall, and that the young man behind it never heard of one!"

He had taken the tickets before she came up, and Kyra, quite indifferent to their destination, coiled herself up with her rug in the corner, and read the novel—which, by the way, contained, so far as she got, nothing half so strange as the incidents in her own life—while Mr. Sutton pored over a catalogue.

The train was an express. Kyra read and slept by turns, and was awakened suddenly by Mr. Sutton's remarking that they were there. He folded the rug for her and got her things together, and Kyra went towards the door to alight. But suddenly she stopped and uttered an exclamation; for there on the station board facing her was the word "Holmby."

For a moment she thought she was dreaming, then she shrank back, pale to the lips.

"What's the matter?" demanded Mr. Sutton, testily. "Now, don't say you feel faint, eh? You must look sharp or the train will go on."

"Can't—can't I go on—go back? I must!" faltered Kyra, half unconsciously; then she saw that the ordeal had to be faced, and, with a sigh of distress, she stepped out.

As she did so a good-looking young man with close-cropped hair and budding mustache passed along the platform looking into the carriages.

"Not here?" he said to one of the porters.

The station-master stepped up with a telegram in his hand.

"The captain's lost the train, sir; and has wired to say he will come by the next."

Kyra did not hear the short colloquy, and she lowered her veil quickly, so that Bertie did not see her face as she passed him on her way to the omnibus. They were rattled and shaken to the inn in the village, and Kyra, still trembling at finding herself there, enquired where they were going.

"To the Hall," said Mr. Sutton. "I've got some things I want to show Lord Ashleigh. If he can't buy—they can't sometimes, you know—we might make an exchange. Did you see whether they put out that small portmanteau? I've got 'em in there. If anything's lost, it's sure to be that bag—Eh, you've got it? All right. Is there anything you'd like for dinner? If so, you'd better say so, or I shall be sure to order the wrong thing."

Kyra shook her head.

"No, no; anything will do. I should like to go to my room at once, please."

There she sank into a chair and covered her face with her hands. Of all happenings, the possibility of her seeing Holmby again had never occurred to her, and she blamed herself bitterly for not asking their destination and refusing to come. She paced the room until dinner-time, recalling the past and devoured by the longing to rush from the place; and when she went down she found Mr. Sutton awaiting her with an open letter on the table before him.

"His lordship will see us at twelve o'clock to-morrow," he said. "Suppose he won't be up till then. Nice hours!"

"Us?" murmured Kyra, aghast. "You will not want me, Mr. Sutton?"

"Oh, yes, I shall," he retorted, impatiently. "Come nearer the fire; you look pale and cold: have a glass of sherry, port, anything—something to warm you before dinner—Of course I shall want you. You know all the prices, and my memory is not good—you've helped to spoil it, you know—besides, you'd like to see the collection. It's nothing to cry about, but there are some interesting things: I sold 'em, most of 'em: why don't you want to go? I thought women loved sight-seeing."

"So we do—sometimes," said poor Kyra. "But I'd rather not go to the Hall—"

The old gentleman stared at her for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders and relapsed into his usual abstracted silence. Kyra could only make a pretence of eating; and as

soon as the meal was over and Mr. Sutton had begun to nod in his chair beside the fire, she went up to her room again, and, drawing the curtains open, looked out. It was a brilliant, moonlight night, and the peacefulness of the scene—the sleeping village lapped by the great hills—brought some peace to her harassed mind. But the beauty of the night, its very peacefulness, awakened in her the desire to go out and look—surely for the last time; for she could never be brought here wittingly, or unwittingly, again—upon the scenes in which the tragedy of her life had opened.

She thrust the desire from her with a shudder, but it came back upon her irresistibly; she told herself that it was most improbable that she should meet anyone she knew, that her thick winter veil would screen her from recognition; and, presently, she put on her outdoor things and left the inn. What memories the little village street awakened! And they crowded more thickly and pregnantly upon her, as, with hurried footsteps and half-frightened glances from right to left, she made her way towards the Elms.

By the gate she stood and looked at the house and shuddered; not only at the recollection of her life there, but because its air of desolation reminded her of that other house in the hideous marshes, where, under the mask of death, she had slipped from her past life and begun the new and strange one in which she now moved. The sight of the place was too painful to be endured; she turned away, and, half unconsciously, entered the lane and went towards the stile. Here she could no longer think of Stracey and his horrible plot against her life, for at this spot the thought of Lance le Breton drove all others away.

How handsome he had looked as he had stood beside her that day and listened to her startling proposal that he should marry her! How nobly and honourably he had fulfilled his promise! His face rose before her, not only as it had looked as he had stood beside the stile, but with the expression that it had worn at the moment of their parting in the little coffee-shop, and he had asked her to—kiss him. The blood grew warm at her heart as she recalled the look in his eyes, the tone of his voice, fierce yet gentle, full of a passion which she did not understand then, if she understood it even now.

She sighed involuntarily. What would he say, think, if he knew that she was still alive, and, more strange still, was standing where he and she had stood—how long ago? Not so very long, though it seemed years to her. But he would

never know. He was far away amongst savages, winning a soldier's glory and renown.

She sighed again as she turned away; then suddenly she heard footsteps and voices, and stopped with a thrill of fear.

They came nearer, and she looked round the hedge behind which she was standing, and saw a man and a woman coming along the footpath across the fields. She glanced from side to side uncertainly. If she left the shadow of the hedge and walked down the lane, they would gain the stile and see her before she could turn the corner. The night was frosty, and the moonlight was almost like daylight; so clear indeed, that, while they were still some distance off, she saw that the figures were those of Lance le Breton and Lady May.

For a moment she was in danger of falling, so great was the shock; then, trembling with terror, she drew still further into the shadow of the hedge, and caught at a bough of a beech-tree near which she stood and which effectually concealed her; and there, almost frozen with terror, she watched them with dilating eyes and parted lips through which her breath came painfully.

As they came nearer, her heart gave a leap of recognition.

It was indeed Lance; and yet how altered! Where was the youthful brightness of the face; where the frank, almost boyish smile she remembered? She had parted from a light-hearted boy; this was a man, young still, but with the gravity, the shadow, of a great sorrow upon him.

And May? Kyra had scarcely any eyes for her; and only half consciously noticed that May had grown beautiful, beautiful with all an English girl's fresh, flower-like charm. But, as she glanced at her, Kyra thought the lovely face was sad and thoughtful.

She could hear them talking now.

"Are you sure you are well wrapped up?" he was saying. "The night is cold though it is so bright. You must not catch cold."

"No; I am all right. I have my sealskin," she responded.

"It was good of you to come out with me, May," he went on. "I wanted to tell you—and yet there is so little to tell."

"Have you not found out anything?"

"Nothing," he said, gravely, and with a repressed sigh. "I saw the doctor—all was in order; he pooh-poohed the idea of anything wrong. And yet— May, did you ever suspect that—that Kyra was insane?"

May started and looked up at him with awed surprise.

"Insane! Kyra!" she exclaimed. "No, no, Lance; the mere idea is absurd, wicked!"

He nodded gloomily.

"And yet the doctor at that place, Heydon, described her as—if not insane—suffering from hysteria and hallucinations."

"Kyra!" said May, indignantly. "It is not true; it can't be. Why, think yourself! *You* know that it can't be true! Lance, didn't you find someone of the Froytes; did you not ask them?"

He shook his head.

"I could not find them. They have gone, and left no trace behind them."

"Is not that rather strange?" she asked.

"In itself, no," he replied. "They may have gone on the Continent—probably have done so. But, dear, it was not only to talk of poor Kyra that I brought you out! Have you made up your mind while I have been away, have you an answer to give me? I hope it is one that is spelled with three letters, May."

Kyra's heart began to beat fast, and her hand closed tightly on the bough, as a faint and sick feeling crept over her.

May turned her head away for a moment so that Kyra could not see her face, then she turned to him again with a resolute look in her eyes.

"It is 'Yes,' Lance, if you wish it," she said, in a low voice that shook a little.

"If I wish!" he said, in his deep tones; and they were deeper than of old, Kyra knew. "It is the only thing that can bring me happiness."

"You are sure? You are sure that I—I shall be able to teach you to forget, to make you happy?" she broke in, with an earnestness strangely profound and pathetic in light-hearted May.

"Dear, trust me!" he said; and he stopped—there by the stile—and put his arm round her.

She turned her face up to him, and he bent to kiss her. Kyra's heart, racked almost to breaking, seemed to cease beating, a dizziness, the horrible simulation of death which preludes a swoon, swept down upon her, and a heavy sigh escaped her white lips.

May heard it and started, withdrawing herself from the kiss and from his arms.

"Lance! What was that?" she asked, fearfully.

He had heard nothing, and he looked down at her startled face with a reassuring smile.

almost impelled her to fling herself upon them and separate them.

It had come at last, this love of which she had heard and read so much; but in which she had scarcely believed, because she had never felt its power. She was in love—and with Lance le Breton, her husband, whom she could never claim!

And he wanted to marry Lady May! Every nerve was tingling with love and love's bane, jealousy. She knew now the meaning of the look in his eyes the day he had promised to marry her, the day they had parted. Knew, now, why he had asked her to kiss him. He had loved her even as she now loved him. And it was all too late! He was going to marry his cousin, Lady May, and Kyra Jermyn was dead: oh, yes, she was dead; and the miserable girl who was now thirsting for his love was—Mary Burns, the antiquary's secretary.

When she reached the inn, she was told that Mr. Sutton had gone to bed—evidently under the impression that she had retired for the night—and she went, with dragging steps, to her own room, there to face the knowledge, the revelation, that had come to her. She confronted it all night, and only fell asleep at dawn. There seemed no way out of the difficulty. She could not reveal herself; to do so would be to betray Mrs. Froyte, who had risked so much to save her; and yet, could she remain quiescent, inactive, and let Lance le Breton unconsciously commit bigamy?

Mr. Sutton was fidgetting with the remains of his breakfast when she came down.

"You're late—and everything's cold; but I've ordered some fresh things. I sent you up some tea— Oh, dear me, how bad you look! Tut, tut! It's the country air, I suppose. I've heard that people are always made ill by it for the first few days. Hadn't you better go back to bed? You certainly don't look fit to go to the Hall!"

Go to the Hall! Kyra, in her hysterical state, could almost have laughed.

"No," she said. "I will wait here until you come back. I had a bad night; I shall be better presently. I don't want anything—but some more tea."

She put her hand to her head, and swayed a little, for the room was spinning round with her.

Mr. Sutton gazed at her with all the alarm of a helpless bachelor, not to say a mere man.

"We'll go back by the afternoon train," he said, anxiously. "You won't faint if you can help it, will you?"

"There is not the least likelihood of my fainting," said Kyra. "Let me put the things ready for you— Oh, yes, I am quite well enough."

He hovered about her—and his precious curios—until it was time for him to go; then, left alone, she leant back in her chair, and, closing her eyes, took up her problem again; but she could not concentrate her mind on its solution, for her heart was aching with the strange longing which had sprung into life at sight of Lance and May last night. Every fibre of her being clamoured of her love and called for his; and the burning waves of shame and humiliation swept over her. Looking back, it seemed to her that the seeds of the love, which had sprung into full growth in a moment, had been planted the first day—even the first night at the ball—she had seen him. It was not only pride in him that had overwhelmed her when she had heard of his heroism, but a woman's love and adoration for the man himself.

She tried to analyse it, to argue herself out of it; but what girl can analyse her heart's longings, can argue herself out of the thralldom of love!

Mr. Sutton did not return until nearly four o'clock; but he came in with a smile of satisfaction in his dreamy eyes.

"Hope you're better!" he said, setting down his bag and rubbing his hands as he surveyed her. "Sorry you couldn't go with me; you'd have been interested. Quite a pleasant visit: saw his lordship—good specimen of the old school: pity he uses such dreadful language: gout, you know. Did some business with him: very satisfactory."

He chuckled, and stroked his white beard, while his eyes twinkled.

"Thinks he knows antiques: always easy to deal with 'em when they think that; and I've not done badly. Very pleasant: had lunch with the family: yes; pity you weren't there. Saw that soldier fellow who's coming into the property; can't remember his name: he's going to marry the earl's daughter: pretty girl. She'll have a grave and sober kind of husband: never saw a man so—so absent-minded. Another young fellow there: quite a boy. Talked to Lady May all the time: did all the talking, in fact: friend of the other man's: should have thought *he* was engaged to the young girl: pretty girl, very!"

Kyra sprang to her feet, her face aflame, her eyes wild.

"Let us go," she said, with feverish impatience. "They—they don't interest me. I want to go back to London."

"Yes, yes," assented Mr. Sutton, with nervous meekness.

"Strange: you are generally so loth to leave the country—Well, well"—as Kyra made a gesture with her hands—"we'll go at once, certainly."

A fly took them to the station; on the way she involuntarily put up her veil, for she felt oppressed by it.

"Headache?" said Mr. Sutton, sympathetically. "Get something from the chemist's: bromide. Ah, here we are. Stop at once!"

The man pulled up and the chemist came out. While he was making up the mixture a good-looking young man sauntered down the street behind the fly, and entered the shop: the proprietor, like most country chemists, sold tobacco. The young man came sauntering out with a box of cigarettes in his hand, and, naturally enough, glanced at the occupants of the fly. Kyra was leaning back with her eyes closed: but though they were closed, she could see Lance le Breton quite plainly, be sure.

Bertie stopped, pulled up abruptly, and stared at her, then, with a flush on his sunburnt face, he tugged off his cap, and exclaimed:

"Miss Jermyn!"

Kyra heard her name spoken in startled accents, opened her eyes, and gazed at Bertie for an instant; then she dropped her veil and turned her head away. A moment afterwards the chemist came out with the bromide, and the fly drove away.

Bertie stared after it with a mixture of indignation and bewilderment. Half an hour afterwards he burst into the billiard-room where Lance was sitting brooding over a cigar.

"I say, Lance, what do you think?" he said, excitedly. "You remember my telling you about old Jermyn and his daughter—in India, you know? Oh, dash it! don't say you've forgotten it."

Lance took his cigar from his lips, but said nothing. He looked like a hound held in leash.

"Well, I've just seen her—the daughter, Kyra Jermyn, you know!"

Lance sprang to his feet, and, grasping Bertie's arm, drove him against the edge of the billiard-table.

"What! What do you say?" he demanded, hoarsely.

"Here, I say!" remonstrated Bertie, stepping on one side. "Draw it mild, Lance! What's bitten you? You forget that you've got an arm like the village blacksmith. Why don't you hit one your own size? And what's the row? I'd only said that I'd seen an old playmate of mine, Kyra Jermyn—"

"Where?" demanded Lance, curtly.

"In the village; outside the chemist's, in a fly. I'd gone in for 'bacca, and I saw her when I came out."

Lance dropped back on to the settee and laughed, a grim kind of laugh.

"You shouldn't drink, to any extent, till after dinner, Bertie," he said, derisively. "Your mind takes to wandering and becomes a prey to fancies."

"Fancies be d——d!" retorted Bertie, with righteous indignation. "I tell you I saw her: saw her quite plainly. She was sitting beside an old cove with white hair and a long beard—"

Lance broke in with a harsh laugh.

"Nonsense!" he said, with a touch of ferocity in his voice. "I happen to know that—the lady you mention, that Miss Jermyn, is—dead."

Bertie's face fell.

"Dead! No; not really, Lance!"

"Yes, dead!" repeated Lance, grimly. "You made a mistake, you see. Oh, I don't want to hear any more," as Bertie opened his lips to expostulate. "I tell you she's dead. I'm going to dress. You'd better do so, too; we're late."

Kyra reached London and Danberry Square; but her head—and heart—ached too badly to permit of her appearing at the table; and yet she could not rest, though she threw herself on the bed and tried to sleep; the pillow seemed scorching hot; she was tortured by the desire to do something; at any rate, to decide upon some course of action; but she could arrive at no resolution whatever. She was like a person bricked up within a wall, powerless to move, and yet conscious that so much depended on her action. Suddenly she remembered poor Bessie. Kyra had not been to White Horse Lane for some weeks. There was a sorrow as keen and bitter as her own: perhaps more keen and bitter, for Bessie's fate was enveloped in doubt.

She rose, bathed her face, and putting on her warm outdoor things—the night was a bad one, even for London; the snow, mingling with the rain, making the air chill and the pavements like shallow rivers—she stole out of the house. It was not a great distance from Danberry Square to White Horse Lane, but the wind was so strong and the sleet so fierce that Kyra took some time in traversing it. She reached the archway at last, and was pausing for breath, when, as she lowered her umbrella, she saw something crouching against the edge of the stone pillar which supported the arch. It was

an indistinguishable heap, and, thinking that it was some drunken person, Kyra was passing on, when a moan rose from it, and, moved to pity, she paused and bent over it.

"Are you ill? Who are you?" she asked.

A face, white and wan in the light of the gas-lamp, lifted itself, and, to her horror, Kyra saw that it was Bessie's! Bessie's—the sunny, golden-haired Bessie's; sunny and bright no longer, but grey and pallid with the hall-mark of sorrow and remorse stamped on every feature, with pain and grief and abandonment in the dull, blue eyes.

"Bessie!" Kyra cried, almost shrieked, for the shock was great. "Bessie—you here?"

The face hid itself for a moment on the rain-sodden arm, then it lifted again, slowly, shamefully.

"Yes, it's me!" came painfully from the blue lips. "It's me. Oh, don't turn away from me! You—you don't know all! It's my fault, I know, I know; but—oh, God, don't turn from me! I'm cold and—dying; yes, I'm dying!"

Kyra went on her knees and gathered the wet, sodden form to her bosom.

"Bessie!" she cried, frantically. "Look up, speak to me. See! I'm not turning from you; God knows I'm not! Come to me, dear! Cling to me!"

She half dragged the thin, feeble form to its feet, and, with her arm supporting it, kept it upright.

"Bessie!" Her tears blinded her as she looked into the wan, haggard face from which shame and misery had struck, with a cruel hand, all the beauty and innocence. "Bessie, you know me! I am your friend, Mary Burns. You are here—at home—"

At the word, poor Bessie shuddered and winced.

"Home!" broke from her pallid lips. "No, no! Let me go! I—I did not mean to come. I don't know I was here: I was half stupid— Let me go!"

Kyra gripped her tightly.

"You shall not leave me," said Kyra, "by a merciful God. Your—"

A cry rose—

"No, no, now—as"

"Yes"

loves y

you ar

She

shrunken figure; but Bessie put it away with trembling hands.

"No, no! I'm not fit for you to touch: you'd never wear it again! You don't know, you don't know!"

"I don't want to know," cried Kyra, brokenly. "Come, dear; come, Bessie. I tell you that he is waiting for you! You believe me? It is his one cry, 'My girl, my Bessie!' Come with me. See, dear, you are at home, at home!"

Bessie clung to her.

"You—you won't leave me!" she panted, as if half distraught with fear. "You'll plead for me? I'm—I'm afraid. No, let me go—I'd better go! I don't know why I came! But I longed to see the place once more—"

She sank again, a sodden heap at Kyra's feet, and Kyra lifted her bodily, and half supporting, half dragging her, led her home.

Nolly was sitting by the table, his head in his hand, his pipe half smoked lying beside him. He heard the sound of the dragging footsteps and looked up as Kyra, panting with the weight of her burden, appeared in the doorway. He rose with a low, deep cry, like the cry of a wild beast whose lost cub is restored to it, and stood a moment in doubt and fear; then he stretched out his arms, sobbing, "My child, my gel, my Bessie!" and gathered her to his breast.

Half an hour later Kyra sat beside Bessie's bed, holding the girl's hot hand in hers, and listening to the feverish revelations. It was the old story—though so new a one to innocent, inexperienced Kyra.

"He was so kind to me—at first!" moaned Bessie. "He said that he would marry me when we got to France. Then—then there was a difficulty, he said; and—and I was alone with him; and it was all strange; I didn't understand what they said: and I was alone, alone—"

She paused and turned her face—scarlet one moment, white the next—to the wall.

"And then—when I asked him, begged him, on my knees, to marry me, he laughed—he laughed!" Her voice broke, and a sob shook her whole frame.

He laughed, and offered to take a house for me, to give me money. And when I—I refused, he said that I'd better that—that he was tired of me. It was that broke me. I knew that it was because I cried—I couldn't help crying; and I tried not to: but I couldn't—I couldn't—"

and Kyra soothed her, pressing her

"It—it does not matter," she said; and, indeed, it did not; for no reparation was possible, and it was better that the man should go unpunished than that Bessie should be brought in contact with him or reminded of him. "Good-night."

John wished her good-night and stood at his doorway looking down at the wet stones. Presently a wet piece of paper blew up against his boot. He picked it up mechanically, and holding it in the palm of his hand, read the name and address written on it:

"MR. STRACEY FROYTE,
"106 South Dudley Street,
"Park Lane, W."

He raised his head, his brows knit, his lips set tightly. Then he carried the piece of paper into his workshop, and carefully spreading it out, nailed it on his bench.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

MR. STRACEY FROYTE sat at the head of his dinner-table at 106 South Dudley Street, Park Lane, the magnificent house he had bought—not rented, be it marked—from a well-known nobleman.

It was not the first of a series of dinner-parties which Mr. Stracey Froyte was giving, and the splendour of the house, the lavish character of the entertainments—there was a dance afterwards in the great ball-room—had rapidly, and as if by magic, gained for the generous, open-handed donor that popularity and celebrity which is one of the marvels of our electric times.

In simple truth, our forefathers would have regarded such a rapid rise in the social scale as marvellous. In olden days a position in society was either inherited or gained by special merit or great deeds. But we have changed all that. The man of the pavement to-day is the man of the *salon* to-morrow. The East End acrobat becomes in the twinkling of an eye the South African multi-millionaire, the favourite of society, the pet of my lady's *boudoir*, an honoured host, and a welcome guest; honoured and welcomed not only because of his vast wealth, but because he can dispense precious "tips" of the Stock Exchange, so that his friends may also become rich.

Money is now crowned King of the World, and there are no rebels to trouble his reign, no cavilling or questioning in the ranks of his noted subjects.

After all, Stracey Froyte's rise had not been more sudden than that of others of whom we wot; and as few questions were asked in his case as in theirs. It mattered nothing to the "smart set" who crowded to his tables, danced in his halls, rode on his drag, and accepted presents, whether he groped in the gutter the day before; the crux of the situation was that he was now rich. And there was no doubt on that point. It was known that he banked at Coutts', that he held enormous quantities of well-known stocks, and that he paid all his huge bills promptly.

It was rumoured that he possessed vast estates and large shares in India and Indian stocks, and the rumour went so far as to state that he had inherited the large accumulations of an English nabob by the name of Jermyn; but the society in which he moved scarcely troubled to listen to the rumours or to repeat them. It was sufficient for them that the money was there, and that Mr. Stracey Froyte was more than willing to spend it. Therefore his name appeared in all the society papers, in most of the charitable lists—and for large sums—and on the lips of rank and wealth, and, alas! beauty; for Beauty bows her delicate knee before the Golden Calf like the rest of us!

Stracey looked down the table this evening with a peculiar smile on his saturnine face; the smile which society was beginning to notice and remark upon: "So—so clever and weird!" it said. "With such a face Mr. Stracey Froyte would have been able to make his way even if he had not been so rich!" It was the hour of his triumph—one of many such hours—and as his eyes, half hidden by their white lids, rested upon a nobleman here, a society beauty next him, a great explorer opposite, and, a little lower down, the proprietor of the latest success in daily papers, with a countess—she had been a well-known music-hall singer—at his side; as he glanced at them round the superbly appointed table, and the line of richly liveried servants, his mind went back to the days—not so very long ago—when he had been the companion of horse-copers and racing touts, of stable-men and—worse; and the reflection occurred to him that even, if his titled and famous guests knew it, they probably would not care, while they could eat his dinners and drink the rare wines and smoke the choice cigars, dance to the Hungarian band, flock to the open house which he kept in Surrey, and obtain invitations to the deer-forest which he had just acquired in Sutherlandshire.

And he asked himself impatiently, with a fierce, inward gnawing, why he, too, could not be as indifferent and as for-

getful. For he had got all he had fought and schemed for. It was all here: the luxury and splendour he had thirsted for; the popularity which he had craved; the position on which his ambition had been set; he had got it all, and so quickly that sometimes he could scarcely realise it.

Kyra Jermyn was dead and her vast wealth was his; for James Froyte and his wife had declined to touch a penny of it, had surrendered it to him and gone away out of his life, had buried themselves in a cheap pension in a little-known Swiss village.

Only once had he swerved from his path, led away by the pretty, child-like face of Bessie Nolly—he cursed himself for his weakness at that moment, even as he bent smilingly to listen to the countess—but he had soon outgrown that foolish fancy, and Bessie, discarded and got rid of, was not likely to trouble him again; for Mr. Stracey Froyte moved in a totally different sphere to that of Nolly, the horse-dealer, and it was so far a cry from White Horse Lane to South Dudley Street that the girl or her father were not likely to come in contact with him. And if they did, it did not very much matter. A gentleman of his wealth and position is forgiven a “foolish fancy,” and the only hold Nolly had on him—the cheque, to wit—Stracey had destroyed long ago.

Therefore, why could he not forget the past? It was dead and buried, and the present and the future were his—his to enjoy, to bask in, to triumph in. But he could not. Even now he was thinking of Kyra as he last saw her, her beautiful face upraised to his, with scorn and defiance in the dark, queenly eyes, the proudly curved lips; even now, Bessie’s white face, all working with agony, which had still something of the child’s in it, floated between him and the artistically painted one of the late “Pride of the Halls,” to give the countess her hard-earned, and, be it said, honestly earned, former title.

The butler filled the Salviati glass at his elbow, and Stracey drank the costly wine almost at a draught, and allowed the man to fill the glass again. He was temperate enough; but to-night he felt that he must get rid of his thoughts, even if he had to drown them as so many of his new friends drowned theirs.

“As I was sayin’,” said the countess, “we might make up a big party for the Epsom meetin’. There’s no one does it better than you, Mr. Froyte—”

Stracey bowed and smiled.

"Oh, yes, you do. You know how to do the thing properly. It's no half-an'-half measures with you."

"Mr. Froyte fills up the bushel to the brim," murmured a fashionable and society-loving bishop, whose presence gave the required finish of ultra-respectability to Mr. Stracey's dinners. "It is with his hospitality as with his charity, Lady Oldfayre. You are not aware, perhaps, that Mr. Froyte has just given me a cheque for five thousand pounds for foreign missions?"

"Oh, I dessay," responded the countess, with a laugh, "he's free enough with his money; and I expect you good people get your share. But about Derby week, Mr. Froyte?"

"Good dinner," murmured old Lord Prynne, wiping his thick lips and helping himself to the hot-house strawberries. "Wonder where the devil he got his cash? These new men learn the ropes pretty quickly, don't they, Shannon?"

His brother peer, who liked a good dinner very well, but hankered still more keenly for the "tips" the new man could give, nodded and showed his yellow fangs.

"Yes: but Froyte's one of the cutest of 'em. He's by way of being a gentleman—"

Old Lord Prynne made a grimace.

—"Well, he's got the veneer, and the trick of speech and manner," said Lord Shannon; "and that's what some of 'em never get. Shouldn't be surprised if this new fellow goes far. That twenty-five thousand he gave to the Childrens' Playground Fund has been noticed where he wanted it noticed; and there may be a baronetcy hanging to it; a knighthood, at any rate. Oh, he's a long-headed devil, Froyte is, and knows how to play his cards."

"So could any other chap if he'd got all the trumps," growled Prynne. "Try this Chartreuse: never tasted anything like it. Why the blazes doesn't my man give me something like it?"

"Why don't you pay his bills?" retorted Shannon. "Froyte pays his, and so gets the pick of his cellar. See? Yes: we've had our day, Prynne; it's these new fellows with their confounded dollars that are on top now: the thing is to share 'em with them, help them to spend 'em."

"Awfully well done, isn't it?" said one woman to another as they passed into the ball-room, already filling with the guests who had been asked to the dance. "These flowers must have cost a small fortune."

"Yes; but this is nothing to the ball he is going to give on the 24th. It is to be royalty this time."

"Only a German princelet," said the first lady.

"This time, yes; but he will have our own royalty before long, you'll see. Mr. Stracey Froyte is not the man to be satisfied with the Small Fry; and he's not a man to be passed over; you can't overlook a man who gives such sums as five-and-twenty thousand pounds as if they were of no account."

"I wonder he does not marry," said her companion, as she glanced round her.

"The wonder would be if he did," retorted the elder lady, with a cynical smile. "He is waiting, of course, until he can feel his feet, until he's sure of his ground. He'll aim high then. Lord Prynne has a couple of daughters; and his party owe him something—the only debt owing to him for the many he owes, poor Lord Prynne! Mr. Stracey Froyte would get his baronetcy all the easier if he were married to a peer's daughter. Oh, yes; he is only waiting."

"Do you call him good-looking?" asked the girl.

The elder lady looked thoughtfully, critically at the tall, thin figure, the dark, and somewhat sombre face, sombre notwithstanding its smile.

"N-o. Some would. But there is something in the face, in the smile, about the lips—oh, I can't quite place it—but something sinister and—uncanny. He looks to me as if he were always thinking of something that he doesn't want to think about—"

"Like Macbeth," suggested the girl, with a smile.

The lady laughed.

"Oh, if you like. After all, most of our present men, our notorieties, have a rather grisly past, like Macbeth. He slew Duncan and one or two others—I forget—but your modern financier, your present-day millionaire, how many ghosts of widows and orphans has he to haunt him? Who knows?"

"But Mr. Froyte isn't on the Stock Exchange!" objected the young girl.

"Isn't he? You'll find he has his hand in the gambling of the day: they all have; they are all splashed with the same brush, even if they are not painted all over. Will I dance, Mr. Froyte; oh, certainly! Lady Evelina and I were admiring the room and the flowers, and she was saying that your taste was irreproachable."

Stracey bore away the lady who had been discussing him so freely, and danced with her to the music of the almost perfect band which he had bought over the head of a duchess; then he took Lady Prynne down to supper—the supper which had cost as much as would have fed an ordinary village for a

month; and, later on, having smoked a cigarette in the smoking-room with a group of his most distinguished guests, peers, financiers, literary and artistic celebrities, and a politician or two—be sure they were not neglected by this rising man—he sauntered to one of the ante-rooms, drew aside the heavy velvet curtains, and looked out.

It was nearly two o'clock, the early morning was cold and forbidding. Rain and sleet had fallen during the night, and the pale, yellow gleams of the street lamps were reflected dully in the wet pavements. Stracey, though the music of his costly band floated towards him, mingled with the buzz of voices and the hum of laughter, was reminded in some way, of the lonely house standing gaunt and grim in the dreary marshes, reminded of Mrs. Froyte's haggard face as she told him that Kyra—the girl he hated and had murdered, the girl with whose money he was mounting the social ladder—was dead.

He was turning away with a thrill of hatred—for, oh, my brothers, we hate those we have wronged and injured; therefore wrong no one, rather suffer wrong and injury uncomplainingly and leave vengeance to God; for in the hatred which consumes the peace of those who wrong you are you avenged—a thrill of hate and unrest, when, as he glanced again at the wet pavement, the murky lamps, he saw a man passing slowly between the lights and shadows; it was a stalwart figure with its coat-collar turned up and a soft cap pulled down to its ears, and something vaguely peculiar about it struck Stracey and he paused, with the curtain in his hand, and looked at it with an unwilling interest which irritated him. For what account was a waif and stray, a common tramp, perhaps, to the wealthy and powerful Mr. Stracey Froyte, whose guests were even then disporting themselves in his magnificent house in May Fair?

The man stopped under a lamp, and raising his head looked hard at the windows. Stracey saw that the upturned face was grey and haggard; saw, too, that it had a strange expression; the dogged, strained look of the hunter: it is the same wherever one sees it; in the Indian jungle where the tiger, the man-slayer is the thing sought; in the Australian forests where the wild boar lurks; in the African wilds where the elephant gambols. The man's face was hungry with the hunter's hunger in every feature.

Stracey saw more than that. He recognised the man.

"It is that carpenter fellow, that lout from White Horse Lane," he muttered. "What is he doing here?" The six-

only men, you see. But you're a woman, and—God knows why—it's only the women as can do it. And you've done it all through trouble of your own, miss. I can see that. That's what makes me grateful, me and John. Of course, you see how it is with him. He was always sweet on Bessie before that scoundrel Black came—"

At this point Kyra used generally to break away. One day she paused at the door of John Warden's workshop. He was leaning against the door, his pipe—it was a dead one—in his mouth, his eyes fixed gloomily on the closed door of Nolly's house.

"Bessie is better to-day, Mr. Warden," said Kyra.

He woke as if from a dream and touched his cap; for both he and Nolly instinctively recognised a superiority, and yielded a willing respect to the beautiful girl who visited and comforted and encouraged their Bessie.

"I'm glad, miss," he said.

"Yes, she is stronger," she said. "I hope that she will soon be able to get up and go out."

"I'm glad, miss," he said, again. "She seems main weak."

"Oh, yes; but she will get stronger," said Kyra.

As she spoke, her wandering gaze settled upon a slip of paper nailed at all four corners upon the carpenter's bench.

"What is that—some measurements?" she said.

John Warden glanced at the paper.

"No, miss; it's something I found."

Kyra drew near the bench, and bending, read the name and address. She allowed a cry, a cry of amazement and of dread, to escape her.

John Warden's hand pointed to the paper.

"You know it!" he said, sternly.

"I—I— Oh, how did you get it? Is it the paper given me by Mr. Wicks?"

"I don't know, miss," he said, between his teeth. "I found it; and I'm thinking it—it concerns Bessie. I've been there—to the address—written on it—it's a grand house, full of people. I've seen them dancin' and heard the music playin'; but I haven't seen *him*, him I'm lookin' for!"

"No, no; it is not the same!" said Kyra, struggling with her agitation. How could Stracey Froyte be the "Mr. Black" who had wronged poor Bessie, the friend and visitor of the Nollys?

"Perhaps not, miss," he said, moodily. "I'll give it to you, miss."

He cut the paper away from the nails and handed it to her, and Kyra took it with a strange reluctance and presentiment of evil. How had Mr. Wicks chanced upon Stracey Froyte's name? She had seen it now and again in the society columns of the newspapers; but she had shrunk away from it, so to speak, had tried to forget him. And now, as by a mysterious process which she could not follow, he had been thrust upon her life again and in a fashion that seemed to defy denial; for the paper that had been blown from her hand before she could read it had been picked up and preserved by John Warden. Could the long arm of Coincidence stretch further?

She went home with the piece of paper in her pocket, and, after dinner, she beckoned Mr. Wicks aside and showed it to him.

"Is this what you gave me the other night, Mr. Wicks?" she asked.

Mr. Wicks looked round cautiously after the manner of a conspirator in a melodrama, and replied hoarsely in the affirmative.

"But—but—oh, it has been very kind of you to take so much trouble, Mr. Wicks—but I do not think this is the man you were looking for," she said; but Mr. Wicks's confidence did not fall.

"Begging your pardon, Miss Burns, but it is," he said, in a whisper. "It's him right enough. I'm rather good at remembering faces, and I spotted him the moment I saw him coming out of the Savoy one night. He'd been to supper there—I used to have a run round to the supper places, the Savoy, the Carlton, and Prince's, to watch for 'em coming out, because I thought them likely places for a man of his sort to be seen at. Of course I couldn't go in: it's too expensive for the likes of me; but I used to stand just outside, so that no one could pass without my seeing 'em. And I made sure of him; for just as he was getting into his brougham, I said, quiet but plain, you know: 'Mr. Black!' and he started and turned round; but, of course, I was looking another way, and, with a swear-word and a scowl—he's got a fine kind of scowl, Miss Burns—he got into his carriage and was driven off. Of course I followed him—and there you are, you know. Not a bad bit of work for an amateur detective, though I say it, miss."

"Indeed, no!" said Kyra. "I don't know how to thank you."

Mr. Wicks got very red, and his mouth opened and closed spasmodically.

"Thanks isn't what I want, miss," he said. "They're no use to me; but—but I know I sha'n't get anything else."

"Anything else?" murmured Kyra; for an instant she misunderstood the poor lad, and her hand was going for her purse; then she read something in his eyes, and her own fell while a blush rose to her face. "But thanks are all I have to give, Mr. Wicks," she said, very gently.

Mr. Wicks gulped down something that rose in his throat and looked at her steadily if miserably; for he was by no means a fool, as has been remarked, and he understood the significance of her words.

"No, miss, no," he said, a little shakily. "Of course not. I—I never expected it. I—I wouldn't presume. And your thanks—and the way you say it—is more than I deserve; and I sha'n't forget 'em. Don't—don't say another word, miss. I understand, oh, yes, I understand. And don't you worry about me, not that you're likely to do that; you're a lady, and I'm—"

—"You have behaved like a gentleman, Mr. Wicks," said Kyra; "a true gentleman—and have come to the aid of a poor girl and her friend—"

"Ah, yes, miss, that's it; it was for you, her friend, I did it," he said, with a nod.

"I know, and I am grateful," said Kyra, very softly, and she held out her hand.

Mr. Wicks took it and looked at it wistfully; but, to his honour be it said, he refrained from kissing it and only shook it up and down. But when he had released it, he dashed into the dining-room and executed a few steps of the horn-pipe before the astonished Mr. Mumly, who took his pipe from his mouth and stared as if he feared Mr. Wicks's mind had gone.

"She's—she's an angel, Mumly!" declared Mr. Wicks, in low but exalted accents. "She's an angel; what's better, she's a brick! She gave me her hand—oh, you may believe me: it's true—and I'm proud! I'm proud, I tell you. I'm so proud that I—I could cry. Give me some whiskey, Mumly: *strong*. Trouble! I'd walk to the end of the world for her—and back again; back again, do you hear?" he added, with an emphasis that seemed to indicate that the return journey would be far the more arduous of the two.

Kyra was, naturally, rather upset by her discovery of Mr. Wicks' affection for her; and at another time his distress would have made her very unhappy; but she found it very difficult to think of anything but the coincidence which seemed to link Stracey Froyte and Mr. Black in one identity. The

vague fear which had assailed her when she looked at John Warden's face, as it bent over the paper, grew upon her; and the next evening after dinner she put on her things and walked to South Dudley Street. She had no distinct intention in doing so, but she seemed drawn to the spot by a presentiment of coming evil.

As she went down the street she saw a line of carriages moving slowly to the house, which had an awning up from the door to the pavement with the accompanying carpet of red baize. A small crowd of sight-seers was gathered on each side, eagerly gazing at the arriving guests and openly criticising them, despite the policeman who kept the narrow way clear.

Kyra, with her veil down, drew near, and looking between the shoulders of a couple of working-men, glanced up through the open door to the hall, where at the foot of the stairs a tall, thin gentleman stood receiving his guests.

It was Stracey Froyte, a flush on his sallow face, a smile on his thin lips. She shuddered as she drew away, thinking of the line, "The wicked flourish as the bay-tree." Here was Stracey Froyte with attempted murder—with murder accomplished, as he thought—upon his soul, ruffling it in purple and fine linen, while she whom he had defrauded, a labourer for her daily bread, was standing on the pavement watching him receive his distinguished guests.

She was gently forcing a passage for herself through the curious and interested crowd when two gentlemen came along the street. They turned out into the road just in front of her to avoid the line of sight-seers, and Kyra glancing at them saw, with a start and a thrill, that they were Lance and the good-looking lad she had seen at Holmby a week ago. For a moment she was too startled to move; and the next she was compelled to remain where she was for they, too, stopped and she could not proceed without passing closely in front of them, and so attracting their attention.

"Something on, Lance," said Bertie.

They had come up on some business connected with the estate which required Lance's presence in London and had been dining at one of their clubs. It had been an almost silent dinner, for since the apparition of Kyra which Lance had seen by the stile he had grown still more grave and pre-occupied; and poor Bertie—well, love had destroyed his former light-heartedness and he was almost as grave and thoughtful as Lance, to whom, notwithstanding Bertie's love for May, he still clung closer than a brother.

Lance nodded.

"A dance," he said.

"Yes; there's the Duchess of Crownbrilliant just gone in. By George! how well she wears! She's older than my *mater*! You wouldn't think it. Who's this coming? Some swell. Looks like a German grand duke or prince." It was the young Prince of Hecklenberg; and the crowd cheered the red ribbon across his waistcoat and the array of orders on his breast. "I wonder who's house it is. Do you know, Lance?"

Lance shook his head.

"No," he said, with a grim smile. "You forget that I know very little of society, that only a few months ago I was a nonentity of nonentities, a captain in the line."

"I'll lay long odds that you've an invitation for this very show stuck up behind the glass in your rooms, or unopened," Bertie retorted, confidently. "Why, you've had cards for every swell show that's been going since you came back; and it isn't society's fault if you ignore 'em."

"I wasn't complaining," said Lance, simply. "This kind of thing isn't in my way, as you know! Let us go on, for Heaven's sake."

"One moment," said Bertie, who, for all his love stricken condition, was still capable of taking an interest in what was going on about him. "I'll just ask whose show this is. Whose house is this, officer?"

"Mr. Froyte's, sir," replied the policeman, saluting Lance whom he recognised by his portraits in the illustrated papers.

Lance took a step forward with an expression of surprise on his grim face.

"Mr. Froyte's?" he repeated.

"Yes, sir," said the policeman. "A grand affair, sir. There's royalty just gone in—gentleman with the orders on—a German prince, sir. Are you going in, sir?"

He seemed to think that a gentleman of Lance's position and celebrity was free to enter any house, invited or uninvited.

Bertie laughed.

"You *have* an invitation, Lance," he said in an undertone. "I saw it on your table. The invitation was issued by the Countess of Oldfayre. She manages the show for him, no doubt. 'Captain Lance le Breton and friend.' I'm the friend, if you care to take me."

He expected Lance to turn away with a gruff and sarcastic negative; but, to Bertie's surprise, Lance stood as if hesitat-

ing and in a brown study, with a heavy frown on his face and a sombre light in his eyes.

"I used to know the man," he said, as if to himself; "that is, I have seen him. Are you sure? Ask if it is Mr. Stracey Froyte."

Bertie, naturally puzzled by Lance's manner, put the question to the policeman.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Stracey Froyte. Has a good many parties— Stand back there! You mustn't pass the line! Stand back! I know, because I'm here to keep the way clear. But this is the biggest and most crowded as I've seen. Yes, it's Mr. Stracey Froyte, sir."

"Are we going in?" asked Bertie of Lance.

Lance tugged at his moustache and frowned. What good could he do by joining Mr. Stracey Froyte's guests? He could scarcely, at such a time, demand of him particulars of Kyra's death.

"I don't know," he said. "No, I don't think so."

"Let's think it over while we finish our cigars," said Bertie, turning away, turning so suddenly that he actually touched Kyra with his elbow.

"I beg your pardon," he said, raising his hat.

Kyra moved aside quickly and crossed the road. There she paused, compelled, as it were, to watch that tall figure as it paced along the pavement. Would they go in? Would Lance, her husband, stand face to face with Stracey Froyte, who had sought to destroy her life, had, indeed, wiped her name from life's record and destroyed her identity?

With one hand on the railings she waited and watched, and presently she saw the two men pass up the crimson carpet and enter the house. She crossed swiftly and was able to follow them with her eyes.

Several persons entered with them, and she saw that Lance and Bertie passed Stracey Froyte with a bow, receiving a bow in response: he had not recognised Lance, had not caught his name as it was indistinctly pronounced by the footman, confused by so many.

The sight of Lance, his nearness, the sound of his voice, had strained Kyra's nerves to the utmost. It was impossible for her to go home at once; it was impossible to leave the place. She had a strange feeling that she had a right to be there, indeed, that it was her duty. What if they should quarrel? And yet, why should they? Lance knew nothing of the vile schemes Stracey had laid to gain her fortune, knew nothing of his attempt on her life; could not guess that, to

escape Stracey Froyte, she had been compelled to become as one dead.

But, though she argued and reasoned with herself, she could not go. She did, for the sake of appearances, walk to the end of the street; but she returned and stood at the back of one of the crowds still lining the crimson path. The guests were still arriving: distinguished, well-groomed men, women in costly dresses, with diamonds scintillating in their hair and on their snow-white necks and arms. But Kyra saw them all as one sees figures in a dream. She was following, in her imagination, Lance: Lance, in the house of her deadly foe!

Suddenly a man crossed the road, and emerging from the semi-darkness, which is the disgrace of the richest city in the world, came into the glow of the electric light that poured from the open doorway of the great house. Kyra glanced at him mechanically and uncuriously; then her manner changed, her self-absorption fled, put to flight by a swift dread. It was John Warden.

"John!" she cried, in a low voice, unconsciously using his Christian name, the name by which Bessie had always spoken of him: she never spoke of him now. "John! You here!"

He started and turned his haggard face to her. He was unshaven, and the blue of his chin and cheeks contrasted with the dead pallor of the rest of his face; in the dark hollows, his eyes gleamed with the sullen ferocity of an unsatisfied revenge; and his lips were drawn over his teeth with the hunter's expression.

"Yes, I'm here," he said, in a hoarse, suppressed voice which had become habitual with him. "Why not? You're here, miss. Why are you here?"

"I—I was passing," faltered Kyra. "I—I know I ought not to stand in a crowd. I'll go: we'll both go. Will you come with me, John? I will go and see Bessie."

His eyes turned from her evasively, impatiently.

"Presently, miss," he said, in a low voice. "I—I want to see in, to see who's standing there. I nearly got a glimpse of him just now, but somebody stepped in between. I want to see him—then I'll come."

"Come now," pleaded Kyra, suddenly possessed by a vague dread and presentiment. "I am tired of standing, I shall be glad to go."

"One moment, miss," he responded; he drew nearer to her and his voice sank to a whisper. "I've watched this house

off and on for days past; ever since I found that paper; but I can't get a sight of him. It mayn't be him—"

"It is not. I know it is not!" Kyra murmured, earnestly.

His sunken eyes glanced at her almost suspiciously.

"How do you know? What skeared you when you saw his name written on the paper? I don't think you'd deceive me, miss, God knows I don't; but what skeared you that evening? No matter. If it don't concern Bessie I don't want to know. I'll come in a minute. I'll go anywhere with you; but I want to see him first. I must satisfy myself."

Kyra put her hand on his arm—the vague fear growing stronger upon her—and tried to draw him away; but he gently shook her hand from him and taking advantage of a moment when the policeman's back was turned, stepped on to the centre of the carpet and stared eagerly into the brilliantly-lighted hall.

Then a cry rose from his lips and he made a movement as if he were going to spring towards the door; but the policeman turned sharply and caught him by the shoulder and swung him back into the line.

"Hi, my man! What are you doing? Mustn't go there, you know. Keep back, please; keep back!"

John struggled in the policeman's grasp, struggled and reeled like a drunken man, and the policeman, always ready to suspect intoxication, addressed him in the usual formula.

"Better go home, my man! Go away, now, and don't make a disturbance. I don't want to charge you, you know; but I've got to keep order. Now, go home, there's a good fellow!"

John Warden, with his eyes still fixed on the lighted doorway, wrenched his shoulder free and fell back. Terror-stricken on his account, Kyra glided to his side.

"Come now!" she said. "You have seen—it is not the same."

He looked at her as if he were half dazed, then his lips opened, and he laughed, a horrible laugh that made her shudder.

"You're wrong, miss," he said, hoarsely. "*It is the same!*"

The next moment he had broken from her as he had broken from the policeman, and looking round him, just as the hunter looks round for some way of reaching his prey, he pushed his way through the crowd and was lost to her sight.

Lance and Bertie followed the stream passing up the broad staircase and entered the ball-room.

"A motley mob," said Bertie, in an under-tone. "All sorts and kinds—like the animals in Noah's Ark. There's old Prynne, and Shannon, with their two countesses; and here's Molly Marvel—beg her pardon, the Countess of Oldfayre. Lord, how jolly she used to be at the Tivoli! Don't you remember her? And there's the Secretary of State for the Colonies in the corner talking to Mrs. Kenedey Chirp, the bishop's wife. All the world and his wife—and other people's wives here, Lance. Shall we dance? I don't care about it; there's no one here one wants to dance with—" No, May—beautiful, sunny-hearted May—was sitting at home at Holmby by the fire in the drawing-room, thinking of Lance—a little, and of Bertie Gordon, a great deal—and wondering whether Lance would bring Bertie back with him. "Splendid moosic: real Hungarian. I suppose one had better dance, eh? Look at the host. He's just come in. Peculiar-looking fellow, ain't he? Never saw him before, nor heard of him. But I've been away; and while I've been away, short as the time is, there's been plenty of new men sprung up. You should hear my *mater* on the subject of these new men. '*Sans-culotte*,' she calls them. Don't know what it means; but it's the dear, old mother's way of being abusive. No, I don't fancy our host, Lance: too much smile of the wrong sort; too much cheap Mephistopheles. 'Fraid he's a bounder of the first water."

"You're in his house," said Lance, in an under-tone, and absent-mindedly.

"Right you are, sir!" assented Bertie. "Just rebuke: accepted with humility. But he *is* a bounder, all the same, I'll lay my bottom dollar. Hallo! there's a girl I used to know in the dark ages before I went to the wars. I'll go and ask her to dance."

"I sha'n't stay long," said Lance.

"I'll find you in the refreshment-room," responded the irrepressible Bertie; and away he went, but with a sigh. Oh, why was not Lady May here? And yet what would it benefit him if she were; for did she not belong to his friend, Lance le Breton?

Lance, left to himself, made his way to a distant corner, and looked at the scene with moody pre-occupation, unconscious that he had been recognised by many and that several were bowing to, or attempting to attract the attention of, the hero of the hour.

His mind was wandering back to that ball at the Hall, the ball at which he had first seen Kyra. How lovely she had looked; how swiftly those dark, speaking eyes had gone to his

heart! He remembered the strange thrill, tremor, that had come over him when she had lifted those eyes to his and spoken to him; spoken the words, which sounded, in their frankness, their appalling candour and directness, so strangely.

He had loved her that night. He had suspected it then, he had been sure of it afterwards; he was as sure now. He remembered the man at whom he was now looking, the young man with the dark and somewhat sinister smile, the thin, twitching lips.

And Kyra was dead, and he, Lance, was here, in the house of that Stracey Froyte, who seemed in some mysterious way connected with her death.

It is a curiously strange world, and we are all the slaves of circumstance, the highest and the lowest of us, the most and the least significant.

It was not a time to ask the question which tortured Lance's soul, not a time to go up to this man, surrounded by his guests, and demand an account of Kyra's illness and death. But the question should be asked later; he, Lance, would call on Mr. Stracey Froyte on the morrow, and ask him.

His thoughts were put to flight by a strange noise, a noise quite out of place and inconsistent with the exquisite music of the band which was at that moment playing the latest popular waltz.

It came from a side of the room where half a dozen servants were, as it seemed, attempting to thrust back a figure indistinctly seen in the mass of plush and gold lace.

But suddenly the man they were struggling with flung them aside as with the strength of a giant, and, with a bound, was in the centre of the room looking round wildly upon the guests, the bejewelled women who, pausing in their dancing, stood gazing curiously and half-fearfully at him; half-fearfully, for the lightest of us is quick to recognise tragedy, and there was tragedy in the aspect, the bearing of this man in the garb of a workman who had fought his way into the centre of this brilliant assemblage.

Some of the servants, recovered from the surprise of his attack, ran towards him with the intention of seizing him; but at the moment, the master of the house himself, Mr. Stracey Froyte, was seen making his way through the crowd of astonished guests; and, with a smile of surprise, of enquiry, on his sallow face he approached the disturber of the gaiety and enjoyment.

"What is the matter, my man?" he began in his slow, soft

voice; then he stopped, for the man had raised a hand and pointed it at him, crying hoarsely, yet distinctly:

"You scoundrel! Black!"

CHAPTER XLI

"You scoundrel! Black!"

The hoarse cry rose above the music, the soft, languorous music which had lulled the dancers into a voluptuous dreaminess; rose above the voices already beginning to be hushed by the appearance of the incongruous figure in the midst of the brilliant crowd. Silence, momentous and oppressive in its contrast to the hum and buzz of only a moment before, followed the cry, and, in groups, the guests stood and stared; the men with a curious wonder, the women with that sense of fear which assails their sex at the first sign and note of tragedy.

As his eyes fell upon Warden, Stracey Froyte stopped and the colour slowly deserted his face, leaving it an unhealthy yellow. Dread shot its arrow at his heart, and he quailed; but it was for a moment only. He was quick to see that the man had made a wrong move, had, indeed, fallen into his, Stracey's, hand. So he raised his eyes and looked straight at the livid, working face, as if he were puzzled and at a loss to account for the presence of this strange figure.

"I don't understand," he said, almost gently, with something like an accent of pity in the quiet, suave voice. "Why are you here, my man? What is it you want? Who are you?"

There was a murmur of admiration and sympathy from the spectators. It really was too bad that such a man as Mr. Stracey Froyte, such a good fellow, should be annoyed by the intrusion of this mad person—for of course he must be mad.

John Warden's accusing hand dropped and his lips writhed at the audacity of the man he had come to denounce.

"You know me," he said, huskily. "I am John Warden—"

"John Warden?" echoed Stracey, with a slight contraction of his brows, as if he were trying to remember the name.

"John Warden," repeated John, with suppressed fury, "you know me well enough; you know why I am here. I'm here to tear the mask from your face, to show you up afore all these people, to tell them what you are, a blackguard and a scoundrel—"

The servants made as if they were going to throw them-

selves upon him, and some of the men guests came forward to place themselves between the intruder and their quiet, self-contained host; but Stracey, with an air of patient dignity, waved them back.

"Do not touch him; leave him to me," he said, courteously. Then he went a step nearer to John. "I think you are under a misapprehension, that you are mistaking me for some one else, my friend," he said, suavely. "But this is not the place for a discussion such as you appear to desire. If you will come with me to another room—to the library—"

"Aye, I'll come with you where you please, Mr. Black," said John, with deep significance; "but before I go I'll tell these people who and what you are. If they've any feelings, any sense o' right and wrong they'll stand away from you, they'll take their wives and daughters out o' your sight and out o' your house as they'd take them from a deadly serpent. This man"—he looked round wildly and pointed his rough hand at Stracey—"calls himself Mr. Froyte here, but he's got another name; he calls himself Black elsewhere, and when it suits him. He's a scoundrel and a villain; aye, as black-hearted a one as walks the earth. He've brought ruin to the sweetest, purest girl that ever lived—"

His voice broke and he tore at his throat as if he were choking. A murmur rose: "Let them put him out, Froyte," one man said, indignantly. But Stracey made a motion with his hand as if to ask for a patient hearing; and John Warden, after a fierce glance round him, went on:

"He knows I speak the truth. He knows what he's done, and what he's got to answer to me for. He found an innocent young girl—yes, there ain't no more innocent and good among ye here!—and, like a snake in the grass, he wound himself into her favour, taught her to trust him, to—to care for him," his voice grew hoarse and almost inarticulate. "She took him for what he pretended to be, an honest man: he's a good actor, is this scoundrel: he's acting now, and so well that he's deceivin' you. And he deserted her. He had no pity for her youth or her innocence, no pity for her love for him; but he took advantage of it all and persuaded her to go away with him. They were to be married. Married! It wasn't long before he tired of her and deserted her—threw her off as if she was a plaything he'd grown tired of; threw her away as one throws a rag into the gutter—"

His hand went up to his throat again and he shook in every limb.

Stracey had listened with a grave countenance, with the

same touch of pity in it; but the man's rude eloquence and terrible earnestness were taking effect upon the other auditors, and they glanced at each other nervously, and then at the pale, set face of their host. Was the man sane, was there any truth in his accusation? They waited breathlessly, and at last Stracey Froyte spoke.

"As I expected," he said. "It is a case of mistaken identity." He looked round with an upraising of the brows, a grave smile. "This man is a stranger to me; I have never seen him before. I need scarcely say that I do not know of whom he is talking. What is the girl's name, my friend?"

He knew that John Warden would rather die than speak Bessie's name in that place, amongst these staring, richly dressed people, knew it, and counted upon it.

John's face went white and his eyes gleamed ominously.

"You say that? Liar! You know well enough! But her name sha'n't be spoken here, her shame—but it's no shame to her—sha'n't be made known here—"

Stracey Froyte shrugged his shoulders, and turned away slightly.

"You must see that you are mistaken," he said. "Be good enough to go now. You can call on me to-morrow if you wish—"

His back was almost turned when John sprang on him with a low cry, a snarl like that of an enraged tiger.

Screams arose from the women, shouts of warning, of excitement, from the men, and several, with the servants, flung themselves on to the combatants; for Stracey had regained his feet and was fighting, struggling, as a man struggles for his life.

Now, at the beginning of the scene, both Lance and Bertie were in the refreshment-room, and they were passing through on their way out; for Bertie had found the dance a disappointment—it only reminded him of May—and Lance was anxious to be gone, when John Warden's deep tones had brought them to a standstill with the rest of the guests.

"What on earth is the matter?" said Bertie. "Some one taken too much? Not already, surely!"

Lance shook his head.

"I don't know. The man looks like a workman. There is some dispute between him and Mr. Froyte. Let us go."

"All very well to say 'Let us go!'" said Bertie; "but who's to scramble through the mob? Here, I say, the fel-

low's giving it to our host hotly! Do you hear him? Is there anything in it?" he asked in a low voice.

Lance shook his head again.

"I can't say. Probably not. The man may be mad."

"He looks like it—and yet he doesn't, somehow," remarked Bertie. "And—and I don't quite like the look of Mr. Froyte. He's too darned cool by half. Now, if it was me who was being slanged in that fashion, I should go for the man like a bag of tricks. I shouldn't stand there shrugging my shoulders and arguing. But there's a peculiar expression about his mouth—that funny sort of twitch you see in the 'prisoner at the bar,' don't you know."

Lance was silent. He was watching Stracey Froyte's face intently: he also had thought that Mr. Froyte was taking the matter too coolly, and he also had noticed the twitch of the nether lip.

"This is no business of ours," he said, suddenly, as if awakening; and, strangely enough, his mind was wandering from the scene at which he was looking to the night he had first seen Stracey Froyte. He had noticed that peculiar, nervous twitch of the lips then, had noticed and disliked it. "For Heaven's sake, let us go! Will you permit me?"

He was begging a way for himself and Bertie, when John Warden's cry of wrath rang through the room, and instinctively he and Bertie sprang towards the assailant and the assailed.

There was a confusion of struggling men and excited voices, the sound of women's screams as they rushed in a kind of panic for the doors. A dozen hands grasped John's stalwart form and dragged him off the again prostrate Stracey; but in his great strength John tugged his foe up with him, and his hands were still at his throat.

Strangely enough, Lance was nearest them as they were pulled and jerked to their feet, and it was he, who, with a strength as great as John Warden's, freed John's hands from their grip; and it was he who stood between the huge man panting like a wild beast deprived of his prey, and Stracey, white and struggling for breath as his hand went up to his strained and bruised throat. John had knocked the self-possession out of him, and he was now white with the fury, the hate, of the man who has been righteously thrashed.

"Take—take him away!" he said, hoarsely. "The—the man is mad, raving mad. No, no, I am not hurt—I am obliged to you—"

He was addressing Lance, but stopped suddenly as he rec-

ognised him, stopped and stared with a half-fearful surprise, even at that moment of excitement.

"Do you wish to give him in charge?" asked Lance, in his grave voice.

John ceased to struggle with the men who held him, and waited; everybody stood and waited. It seemed as if Captain le Breton had become master, controller, of the situation.

"Yes," replied Stracey, savagely; then he seemed to falter as if he had remembered something. "No. I—I bear the poor fellow no ill will. Let him go—let someone see him off the premises—put him in a cab. No doubt his friends will take charge of him, will prevent him making a nuisance of himself for the future. It must be evident to all that he is out of his mind."

It was more than flesh and blood could stand, and John, tearing himself from the grasp of the servants, flung himself at Stracey again. Lance, who had been watching his eye, stepped in, and once more caught John by the arm.

"No, no!" he said. "Stand back, my man."

"Let me go, for God's sake, let me go!" pleaded John, fiercely. "Who are you to stand between us? You look like an honest man, a gentleman! Do you think I'm mad? Which of us, d'ye think, speaks the truth? I charge him with going under false colours, with the ruin and desertion of an innocent girl!"

The screams rose again as John struggled in Lance's iron grasp; the crowd of women swayed to and fro, uncertain whether to go or stay, half fearful of remaining, yet anxious to lose nothing of this dramatic incident, this piece of tragedy of which all the fashionable world would be talking on the morrow.

And as the commotion increased, as the brilliant throng pressed this way and that, shouting, talking, crying out for the police, the tall figure of a lady, dressed in black, made its way through the mob and approached the centre of the hurly-burly.

Kyra had stood beside the entrance, waiting for, dreading, she knew not what. There had been murder lurking in John Warden's eyes as he had left her, and she could not go. It was of him and for him she feared, not for Stracey Froyte. She knew that if any harm came to John, poor Bessie's burden, already heavy enough, would be doubled. That she could do anything to save him, Kyra did not know. But she could not leave him. No one but herself knew him, no one

would stretch out a hand to save him from some rash, desperate deed, some reckless attempt to avenge the girl he loved.

And as she stood, wringing her hands together in her poignant grief, dread, she heard John Warden's savage cry, and the screams of the women. Instinctively, impulsively, she ran into the house and up the stairs—there was no one to stop her, for the servants had all rushed to the ball-room, leaving the hall unprotected—and gaining the door-way, stood, panting and trembling. No one noticed her presence—the presence of a lady in out-of-door things—for every eye was fixed on the centre of the room where the two men were confronting each other; and Kyra was as heedless as those amongst whom she stood; was unconscious of everything but the fact that John Warden was in danger of perpetrating some rash act that would place him in the hands of the law.

Then had come the lull, and, suddenly becoming conscious of her whereabouts, she was turning away when John's second attack took place. His despairing cry, the pathos of his appeal to Lance went to her heart, and, obeying the woman's impulse which had sent her thus far into the house, she pushed her way through those amongst whom she was standing and crossed the room, her hand stretched out in mute appeal.

Lance's back was towards her, and he did not see her, neither did John Warden; but Stracey was looking in her direction, and they who were watching his face saw it blanch, then grow livid with a fear more striking and intense than it had worn even when John's hands were at his throat. His lips opened and moved as if he were about to cry out, but no sound came, and his distended eyes were fixed with an agony of dread in them upon the advancing figure. Then suddenly, with a terrifying suddenness, he stretched out his arms, and, with an inarticulate cry, staggered and fell forward on his face.

There was a moment's appalled silence, then, amidst shrieks and shouts, some of those near him flung themselves on their knees beside him, while one or two shouted:

"A doctor! A doctor!"

In that moment of arrested motion, Kyra also stood still; then she went quickly to John's side and laid her hand on his arm.

"Come with me, with me!" she said, in a shaken voice.

"Oh, come with me at once! For—for Bessie's sake!"

Lance was quite near them. He had turned to Stracey as he fell—for he had seen that he was going to do so, and hoped

to catch him in time—but as he turned he saw the tall, graceful figure standing beside him, and he stood deprived of all power of motion, even of thought, stood like a man in a dream. The spell that her presence had wrought upon him, that night he had seen her by the stile, fell upon him now and rendered him helpless, as helpless as one bewitched.

Her voice—the voice that haunted his dreams—broke on his ears and set him free. With a low cry he dashed his hands across his eyes then, stretching out his hand, took a step towards her; but Kyra had moved away, still with her hand on John's arm, and the crowd had got between her and Lance. He was thrusting them aside, when Bertie caught him by the shoulder.

"What's up; what the matter, Lance?" he demanded. "The man's going quietly—let him go. And for God's sake let *us* go. Froyte's had a fit or something of the kind; we can't do any good, and we'd better clear out."

"He half dragged Lance away as he spoke; but Lance resisted, still staring in the direction in which Kyra had gone.

"Leave go!" he said, hoarsely, as they unconsciously got clear of the crowd. "I—I must follow her!"

"Follow her? Who?" asked Bertie, impatiently. "Why, what's made you lose your head, now, old man? You've been as cool as a cucumber all through the worst of the business."

"I must follow her," repeated poor Lance. "You saw her—the lady—she who came to the man?"

Bertie nodded.

"Of course. His wife, sister, somebody belonging to him—though, by the way, now you mention it, she *did* look like a lady. You don't happen to know her? But, of course not; how should you?"

"Yes—yes; I know her!" said Lance. "Know her! She is—"

He stopped and put his hand to his brow and groaned. Was he going mad? Had the constant brooding over his lost love destroyed his reason? Kyra was dead. And yet, if it was not she whom he saw in the lane, if it was not she who was here close to his hand, if it was not her voice, who—merciful Heaven!—*who* was was the woman who bore her likeness!

"Go—go and see if they are there—the man—the woman, for—for God's sake!"

He almost pushed Bertie from him, and Bertie ran through the hall and into the street—in time to see a cab drive away.

"Yes, sir," said the policeman. "They've gone: I'd no power to stop 'em, you see, sir; there was no charge, and the man was sober."

"Did—did you take their address?"

"Yes, sir; of course. The man's name is John Warden, White Horse Lane, Pentonville."

CHAPTER XLII.

THE reaction had set in upon John before he had reached White Horse Lane with Kyra, and he leant back with his hand covering his eyes, spent by the force of his passion.

Kyra, womanly wise, said nothing to him until they were crossing the yard, then she put her hand on his arm and looked up at his white, haggard face, with grave pity and sympathy, but with that look also which the eyes of her sex wear when it is going to use its influence over us.

"Are you satisfied, John?" she asked in a grave voice. "Is your vengeance heavy enough—"

His eyes glowed with the embers of his wrath.

"Satisfied!"

"Yes: you should be. You have torn the mask from him; you have revealed him in his true colours. Did you see his friends—his guests—turn from him; and did you see his face when he fell?" Her voice was almost inaudible and she shuddered.

"Aye, I saw him," he said, drawing a long breath. "But I thought—" he stopped and drew his hand across his eyes. "I thought it was something else had scared him; he wasn't looking at me—I was watching him."

Kyra's eyes dropped before his puzzled gaze.

"Whatever it was that struck fear to his soul, it was your presence that caused it, brought it there. Be satisfied, John! For Bessie's sake, be satisfied. He is punished and by your hand—"

"I wish I'd killed him!" broke from his white lips.

"Perhaps you have," said Kyra, solemnly. "There was death, worse than death, in that face. But we will not say any more. I am going to Bessie. She must not know—"

"No, no," he said, sighing; then with an indescribable bitterness he added: "It's like enough that she cares for him still—"

"No, no!" said Kyra, with conviction. "She has ceased to care for him; he has killed the love she once bore him as surely and completely as you have torn the mask from him."

Let that thought comfort you. And now"—she looked at him steadily—"I want you to give me a promise, John. After to-night I shall not be able to come here and see Bessie; I want you to promise that if anyone comes to enquire for me you will not tell them where to find me."

"It's easy to promise—and I'd do anything for you, miss—for I don't know where you live. I only know that you've come to us like an angel. Yes, I promise."

Kyra had a few more words with him, words of comfort, of faint hope for the future; then she went in to Bessie. Late as it was Mr. Nolly was up, and started to his feet as she knocked and entered.

"Where's—where's John?" he asked, anxiously. "I heard his voice outside. He's been away agen: has he—has he found—"

"Yes," said Kyra; for she knew that it would be better to tell him the truth. "He has found him."

"Has he—killed him?" came Nolly's hoarse whisper.

"No, thank God!" said Kyra, gravely; "but he has avenged Bessie; has inflicted a punishment worse than death to such as he."

She told Nolly of the scene in the ball-room where the betrayer had been confronted and denounced by John, of the awful collapse of the man in the midst of his guests, and Nolly drew a long breath as she finished.

"It ain't half enough," he muttered. "He's rich, you say? His fine friends won't care for what he's done; they'll think little enough of it. Couldn't John get at him, reach him? If I'd been there—"

"Another Hand reached him," said Kyra. "The Hand that deals out a vengeance greater and heavier than man's. Forgive me, Mr. Nolly; it is easier to speak of pardon and renunciation when one is not the sufferer."

But had she not suffered at Stracey Froyte's hand? A wave of bitterness passed over her, and she, too, drew a long breath.

"Will—will they 'want' John for what he's done?" asked Nolly, gloomily. "Will they send the police after him?"

"No; I think, I am sure, not," said Kyra. "He is quite safe. Is Bessie awake?"

"Yes; I heard her walking up and down just now," said Nolly; and Kyra went up to Bessie's room.

Bessie uttered a cry of dismay and clung to her arm.

"You are going away, to—to leave me?"

"I am going away for a time," said Kyra. "It is hard to say good-bye; it is harder not to be able to explain, to tell you why I must go. And, Bessie, I want you to give me a promise which John has already given, that you will not tell anyone where I live."

"I promise," said Bessie, with a sigh. "But, oh! what shall I do without you, Kyra? You don't know what you have been to me—and John," she added, innocently. "But for you I should not have found courage to live—"

"Are you so grateful for the little I have done, Bessie?" asked Kyra, with intent.

"Grateful! Ah, if you could only know!"

"And you want me to know, to be sure? It is so easy to prove it. Prove it by trying to *forget*, dear—to forget your great wrong and sorrow, and to remember one upon whom that wrong and sorrow has fallen as heavily as upon yourself."

Bessie looked at her with a half-startled, half-frightened, expression, then she hid her face in her hands.

"You mean John!" she said, scarcely breathing.

Kyra pressed her hand.

"He loves you still, with the great, tender, never-dying love of a good and an honest man, Bessie, dear; and he deserves that you should think of him a little, and try—"

Bessie crouched at Kyra's feet and hid her face on her knees, and Kyra smoothed and caressed the golden head brought so low, and said no more. When she had at last gently unwound Bessie's arms and gone—her last words were, "If you want me, Bessie, send for me, and I will come at any risk!"—Bessie threw herself on the bed face downwards and wept the tears which heal even while they torture; and presently she rose, and, stealing to the window, looked out.

John was pacing up and down the courtyard, his head bent, his hands gripped tightly behind him; and once he paused and raising his head, glanced towards the window from which, unseen by him, she was looking down at him.

Meanwhile, Bertie had succeeded in persuading Lance to go to his rooms in Adelphi Terrace; persuaded, for Lance seemed to have lost his balance; and to Bertie's dismay appeared to be in some grave trouble which made him, usually so calm and self-possessed, restless and excited. Bertie remained with him until dawn, patiently keeping silent while Lance paced up and down the room, smoking pipe after pipe. Most of the time Lance was asking himself whether he was going mad, whether this recurring apparition of Kyra was not the evil

dence of insanity: and yet, despite the glaring improbability, impossibility of the thing, there lay in the bottom of his heart a hope, too vague to be recognised, that—he scarcely knew what.

Early in the morning he had a bath and changed and sat down to breakfast; but in a minute or two he had sprung to his feet as if he could contain himself no longer, and without a word left the house.

The cabman, when he was told to drive to White Horse Lane, Pentonville, looked at Lance—pale and haggard of countenance—and, no doubt wondered what business this good-looking “swell” could have at such a place as far Pentonville. As soon as Lance got through the archway he saw John Warden standing at the door of his workshop.

“I want to have a word with you,” he said, rather abruptly; and John nodded moodily but not sullenly.

“You’re the gentleman as stood betwixt him and me last night,” he said; and he turned to old Nolly who was going across the yard with the slow, heavy step which was now habitual to him. “Here’s a friend o’ his, Mr. Nolly.”

Nolly swung round and regarded Lance with a scowl.

“If you mean the man I saved from you, you are mistaken,” said Lance, with grim promptitude. “I am no friend of his, and I did not come to talk of him.”

“Ah,” remarked John, bitterly, “we think of nothing else here, sir.”

“I’m afraid you’ve had cause to do so,” said Lance, more gently. “Do you know that he was still unconscious when I and my friend left his house last night?”

“You could give us better news even than that,” responded John, with significance. “What’s your business with me—with us, sir? We’ve no cause to welcome a gentleman in the Lane, neither of us.”

“I apologise for intruding,” said Lance. “I wanted to ask you a question—There—there was a lady with you last night, the lady with whom you left the house—”

He stopped, with evident agitation.

“What of her?” demanded John, coldly.

“I shall be glad if you will tell me her name and where to find her,” said Lance.

“What’s your reason?” asked John, sternly.

Lance was silent a moment. What could he answer?

“Do you think I’ve no right to ask?” said John. “Do you think as we haven’t suffered enough from your sort not to want to protect one as has been an angel to us and ours—”

"Before God I mean her no wrong!" poor Lance broke out, with such an evidently genuine burst of emotion that even John was impressed. "The lady of whom I am enquiring is like—strangely like—like one I knew; one who was very dear to me. She may be a relative—I must see her—ask her. Will you tell me her name?"

He waited, half fearfully, for the answer.

"Miss Burns," said John.

"Miss Burns." Lance sighed with vague disappointment. "No, I never heard it before. Will you tell me her address?"

"No, I will not," responded John, curtly, and with a warning glance at Nolly. Lance looked at him fixedly.

"One question more: Is it by her request that you refuse to give me the information; were you told to keep it from me, especially from me?"

"And if I was—" began John, off his guard.

Lance started, and, sinking on to the seat under the tree, hid his face in his hands for a moment. What did it mean? Who was this mysterious woman who was so like Kyra; and why—if she did not know Lance—should she wish to conceal her address from him?

The two men watched him in brooding silence; then John went and stood beside him, looking down at him.

"You say that the man I should have liked to have killed last night is no friend of yours; but you were in his house, you were one of his fine guests—"

"By an accident, by chance," put in Lance, absently.

"You were there, anyhow," said John, sternly. "Do you think I spoke falsely last night when I called him a scoundrel? If so, look at that window." He pointed at Bessie's. "In that room lies the girl he ruined and deserted; look at this man—he is her father. Mr. Nolly, tell him what a black-hearted villain the man is. You and I knew him as Black by name; but he's got another, a finer one he wears for his grand friends."

"John's right enough, sir," said Nolly, in a low voice. "He's done a cruel wrong on my poor girl; he isn't fit to live. He was always a bad lot—but—but I thought he'd take a turn on the right road, like some others of us. I'd got a hold on him, too—a bit of a cheque which wasn't quite right—but he stole that from my pocket-book the night afore he ran away with my poor Bessie. Yes, he's a bad lot, sir; as bad as they make them. There's no knowing what he's done. There

was that house he took, for a friend, he said—the house at Heydon—”

Lance started and looked at Nolly, and held his breath.

“The house at Heydon!” he said, with suppressed excitement.

Nolly nodded.

“It was an old, ramshackly place o’ mine; said he wanted it for a friend: but—I was down there yesterday—I heard that someone like Black had been seen there, that a young lady had died there. And that ain’t all; the woman at the village shop said she’d heard that the place was haunted, that the nurse who’d nursed the poor young lady had seen her ghost on the stairs, and that the ghost was so real and life-like that the nurse could have sworn that it *was* alive.”

Lance rose, moved by horror and some strange emotion.

“For God’s sake, tell me no more!” he said, hoarsely, “unless you will tell me where and how I can find the—the lady who was with you last night!”

John shook his head, and an angry, passionate expostulation was about to burst from Lance’s lips when the Nollys’ door opened and Bessie stood there looking at them sadly.

At sight of her white, wan face John groaned, and, after one lingering, imploring glance, turned away; and Lance rose and raised his hat with a gesture of infinite respect. He guessed in a moment that he was looking at Stracey’s victim.

Bessie came towards him, her eyes downcast, her face colourless.

“I’ve been listening—I have overheard,” she said, scanning Lance’s face with a keen scrutiny, an open scrutiny, as if, in her regard for the welfare of her friend who was so dear, she had lost, for the time, all sense of her own shame and trouble. “I could not help overhearing. They are right; they cannot tell you where to find her. Why do you ask them? Why have you come here?”

She sank on to the seat and looked up at him pleadingly, and Lance looking down met her searching gaze with his usual frank and honest one. For a second or two he hesitated, then he leapt to a decision. He would tell this girl with the sad, pure eyes, the pallid, sorrow-wasted face.

“I came in search of her because—I love her,” he said, in a low voice; “love her better than life itself. We were parted, parted by circumstances so strange as to be almost incredible. I left her at a place called Holmby, and went abroad. There I heard of her death, at this other place Heydon, of which your father spoke. She was in the hands of a villain”—his

voice broke. "I mourned for her—God alone knows how I mourned for her, how, try as I will, I cannot forget her. I came home and had not been in England many weeks before I—I saw her, or her spirit"—his voice dropped and became almost inaudible. "It was in a country lane, at a spot where we had met when she was alive: I could only tell myself that my love, my grief for her loss, had called her from the grave—you will know what I should tell myself. Then—then I came to London, and last night by mere chance I went into a house"—he paused at a warning gesture from Nolly—"and there I saw her again. A lady came into the room—she was veiled, but her form, the poise of her head—a movement—the tones of her voice—Am I mad or is it possible that there is some dark mystery, and that—that—I can't speak the hope that, wild as it is, persists in haunting me!"

He covered his eyes with his hands again and was silent for a moment.

"You see, you understand? You can appreciate my suffering, the torture of suspense and doubt. If the lady I have seen only bears a resemblance to her whom I have lost, I—I shall at least be rid of this haunting doubt."

There was silence for a moment, then he stretched out his hands to her.

"You will tell me, help me now!" he implored.

Bessie sat and gazed straight before her; her woman's mind quickly piecing together the dark puzzle which bewildered him.

"I cannot tell you—but I may help you," she said, in a low voice.

"I thank you!" said Lance, in a voice which shook.

"Will you tell me your address?" she said, after another pause.

He told her and watched her face anxiously; but it was like a pallid mask.

"One thing more, sir, I want to ask you. How did you come here to enquire for her?"

"She was at his house with John Warden last night," said Lance.

She looked at him and rose with a cry on her lips.

Lance rose.

"What have I said, what have I done?" he said aghast.

Nolly went up to her to put his arm round her, but she put him aside and looked into his face.

"John has found him: it is the same, father, the same as the man this gentleman tells of at—Heydon. Heydon, yes!"

"It's the same—it's Black, yes, Bessie," murmured Nolly, hoarsely.

She stood gazing before her for a moment, then, as if she had lost all sense of their presence, passed into the house.

"I must go after her, sir—she's motherless and has only got me," said Nolly. "God knows what's passing through her mind: she's a woman now, is my little gel, and women have cuter brains than us men. Better wait and see what way her mind turns."

Lance rose.

"I'll go," he said, in a low voice. "I will leave myself in her hands; but—but—it will be hard to wait."

"You mayn't have long to wait, sir," said Nolly. "Women act quicker than us, and she— But she won't move at all if she thinks you mean to harm that scoundrel."

"I"—began Lance; but stopped—"I make no promise," he said grimly, as he went.

The mystery which was sapping his courage and making a storm-tossed thing of his life, storm-tossed on a sea of doubt and vague hopes too exquisite to be expressed, was in the hands of this sorrow-stricken girl across whose path Fate had thrust him so strangely.

Kyra lay awake that night thinking deeply; it was evident that she would have to leave London, perhaps England; for not only had Lance seen her, but Stracey; either of them might come upon her suddenly in the street or in some place when her veil was raised, and might discover that she was indeed Kyra Jermy, and not dead as they supposed. She shuddered at the complications, at the consequences, which would result.

Yes; she would go away, go into hiding: and yet— The prospect of Lance's marriage with Lady May rose to trouble her on another point. Could she remain quiescent and passive while Lance made a marriage which would be no marriage?

She was pale from the want of sleep and the incessant strain of these and kindred thoughts when she went to Walton Street to commence her day's work. Mr. Sutton was already there and remarked her pallor and evident weariness, and when she told him that she was afraid she would have to throw up the situation, he sighed and ran his hands through his hair in a kind of despair.

"Just what I expected," he said. "That's like a woman all over. Directly you are of any use to a man, you want

to leave him. There! Don't cry; you can't help being a woman."

"I'm not crying," said Kyra, smiling through what was suspiciously like tears. "And I am very sorry to be obliged to leave you; but circumstances—something has happened—"

Mr. Sutton put up his hand and waved it excitedly in the air.

"Oh, of course, I know what has happened: you've what you call fallen in love; you're going to be married. Foolish, foolish woman! When you might have spent the whole of the rest of your life studying early Italian intaglios! But you never know when you're well off."

He struggled into an overcoat at least two sizes too large for him and went out, slamming the door after him with a violence which made Kyra jump; for she felt all nerves that morning. She considered it wiser to remain in the house until it was time for her to go home, and she sent the slip-shod maid servant for a glass of milk for her lunch; and she was drinking it, not because she liked it, but that she might be more fit for the afternoon's work, when there came a timid kind of knock to the door, and, opening it, she was surprised to see Mr. Wicks.

Mr. Wicks had made a resolution to assume cheerfulness even if he could not really possess it; so that whenever he met Kyra he immediately put on a grin which transformed his face into the likeness of a pantomime mask; and he grinned at her now as, with an air of mystery, he drew a letter from his pocket.

"I hope I don't intrude," he said, apologetically; "but this came for you this morning after you left—I was staying at home with a sick 'ead ache—and thinking it might be important, I thought I'd better bring it on to you."

Kyra thanked him and opened the note, and, half unconsciously, read it aloud, so that Mr. Wicks caught a word here and there, though he whistled softly to show Kyra that he was not listening. The note ran thus:

"I need you very badly. You promised to come to me if I sent for you. Will you meet me at No. 98 Adelphi Terrace to-night at eight o'clock?"

"Your grateful friend, BESSIE."

"Where is Adelphi Terrace, Mr. Wicks?" asked Kyra, after a long pause, during which Mr. Wicks had stared at the ceiling as if he had discovered something of absorbing interest there.

He told her and looked at her so wistfully that Kyra said with a tired little smile:

"It is all right, Mr. Wicks; it is a note asking me to be at Adelphi Terrace to-night at eight o'clock. The person who brought it did not want an answer I suppose?"

"He did *not*," said Mr. Wicks, emphatically. "It was a boy; and I regret to say that when I caught hold of him to ask him if an answer was required, he gave me one in the chest and bolted. Boys will be boys, Miss Burns. I suppose there is nothing I can do?" he added, still more wistfully.

Kyra told him "no;" and with her reiterated thanks ringing in his large ears, the faithful Mr. Wicks took his departure: but he went slowly down the street and shook his head thoughtfully at intervals.

A year ago Kyra would have been far too nervous to go to a strange house, even to meet a woman friend, at so late an hour; but amongst other things experience endows us with courage and teaches us self-reliance; and she did not hesitate for a moment. She had promised to go to Bessie when Bessie needed her: it was evident that the poor girl was placed in some difficulty, perhaps in danger. It seemed to Kyra that though she could do little towards guiding her own life, she could help and protect Bessie; and the thought brought her some consolation.

She remained at Walton Street until half-past seven; then she put on her things and made her way to Adelphi Terrace. The night was a wild one and the rain blew in wet gusts across the river and the Embankment. As she approached the steps to the Terrace, holding her thick cape closely round her, and occupied with her thoughts, with the problem which seemed to evade every possible solution, she did not notice the few passers-by, who, like herself, bent their heads before the storm and hurried along the pavement as if anxious to reach a place of shelter; did not notice the tall, thin figure of a man who strode past her with a quick, uneven step, his hat drawn over his brows, and his coat collar turned up, so that his face was almost hidden. He swung past her, without noticing her apparently, and nearly brushed against her; but suddenly he stopped and looked back at her over his shoulder and his hand went up to his lips as if to stifle a cry of amazement and of fear.

He went on a few paces, more slowly; then he stopped again and turned gradually, as if he feared to look back but could not help himself. His face was a sallow whiteness in the lamp-light, and drawn and working like that of a man

who is flying from some peril or, worse still, from some haunting dread.

When he had looked again at the graceful, black-clad figure, he staggered and put out his hand against the stone wall of the Embankment as if for support; and his lips moved with the muttered words:

"Again! But—but—it's only fancy: or I must be going mad. I'll go home."

He did go a few yards; but as if something were drawing him in the direction in which Kyra had gone, he turned with a savage, desperate oath, as if he were yielding to an irresistible impulse and strode quickly after her, quickly, yes, stealthily.

CHAPTER XLIII.

BESSIE reached Adelphi Terrace at a quarter to eight, and, fighting against her nervousness, rang the visitor's bell. But though she was nervous she was resolute, and she enquired for Captain le Breton in a firm though low voice.

"Captain le Breton is out," said the neat maid-servant.

Bessie uttered a faint cry of dismay.

"I—I wrote to him," she faltered; and the girl, eyeing her with the calm scrutiny of the experienced London servant, asked her to step inside.

"If you'll wait here a minute, I'll fetch Mr. Spilkins, Captain le Breton's gentleman. I think he's in."

Bessie sat down in the hall and waited, her nervousness increasing each minute, and presently Spilkins came down.

"I—I want to see Captain le Breton. I wrote to him this morning," said Bessie.

"Captain le Breton started for the country soon after breakfast," said Spilkins, eyeing her with a scrutiny akin to that of the maid, and, like her, satisfied with Bessie's quiet and modest appearance and manner.

"Oh, dear!" she said, with a troubled sigh. "I—I didn't think of his being out. I—I told him I was coming—"

"The captain has gone to a place called Heydon—" Then Spilkins stopped: it was not his place to tell his master's whereabouts to a stranger, and a woman to boot.

"To Heydon!" echoed Bessie, with knit brows. "Then—then when may he come back? Oh, it is so important—it is of the greatest importance! And what is the time, please? I—I must go—" She broke off, as she thought that Kyra might come at any moment.

"Nearly eight," said Spilkins, glancing at his watch. "As to when Captain le Breton may come back, I can't say. It's likely that he may dine at his club."

"Couldn't—couldn't you fetch him?" asked Bessie.

Spilkins stared at her and rubbed his chin; then he said, rather hesitatingly:

"If it's business of very great importance—well, I *might* go to the club and tell the captain you want to see him; but as to 'fetching' him—well, that's a bold word, is 'fetching.'"

"I know, I know!" cried poor Bessie, and her evident distress touched Spilkins, who, like most Tommies, was of tender heart. "Please forgive me, but I'm sure, if Captain le Breton knew who was waiting here, who I'm expecting every moment, he would come."

"Give me your name," said Spilkins, with sudden resolution, "and I'll run round to the club and tell him you're here; but don't make certain that he'll come."

"I am Miss Nolly," said Bessie, in a low voice.

Spilkins got his hat and coat and umbrella, and, with another glance at the white, wasted face—a glance of pity—went off. A few minutes later Bessie heard the clocks striking eight, and rose with a timid glance at the door. Then there was a ring at the bell, and the maid-servant came up from the kitchen to answer the summons.

"If—if it is a lady asking for me—Bessie Nolly—will you let her come in, please?" said Bessie.

The maid hesitated a moment, and promptly returned to the kitchen to fetch the landlady. Mrs. Simpkins surveyed Bessie keenly and somewhat severely, for she did not "hold" with visits from "young persons" at that hour of the evening to her respected and much-petted lodger, Captain le Breton, and was naturally disposed to regard them with suspicion. But Bessie's sad, white face and innocent eyes disarmed her as they had disarmed the maid and Spilkins, and she motioned to the maid to open the door.

At Kyra's voice enquiring for her, Bessie uttered a little cry.

"She has come!" she breathed, almost unconsciously, and she went forward to meet her.

"Bessie!" said Kyra, quietly. "What is the matter—what has happened? Are you in any trouble?"

For answer Bessie almost sprang to the landlady and agitatedly whispered in her ear:

"She must not know whose house it is, who lives here—must not hear Captain le Breton's name! He will be here

presently—will you let us wait until he comes? And—and do not let her hear his name, please, please; or she will go!”

Mrs. Simpkins regarded her in blank amazement for a moment, then looked at Kyra; and with swift instinct saw that while Bessie was quite “respectable,” this other was a lady—and therefore to be implicitly trusted.

“Show the ladies to—upstairs,” she said to the maid; and she whispered to Bessie as they passed:

“Is it his sister?”

Bessie shook her head but said nothing, and she and Kyra followed the servant to Lance’s sitting-room; then, when the door had closed, Kyra said, gravely:

“Now, Bessie, tell me at once why you asked me to meet you here. I came because I thought you were in trouble, that you had need of me; I came because I promised.”

“Yes, yes; I do need you, and others need you—oh, very, very badly, Mary, dear; but, dear, you will not ask me just yet; you will wait, only for a little while! So much depends upon it—oh, you will wait, Mary?”

She caught her hands imploringly as they sat on the sofa side by side, and regarded her with beseeching eyes.

“Of course I will wait, Bessie,” Kyra said, but with her brows knit. “Are you sure that you have done wisely—I am confident that you are acting with the best intentions—in coming out on such a night, and—and to this strange house; for it is strange to you, Bessie, I can see? You are not strong—you look frightened and anxious.”

“No, no; I am not frightened,” said Bessie, quickly. “Why should I be? But I am anxious. Oh, if he would only come!”

“He! Who? Whom do you expect, whom are you waiting for?” asked Kyra.

At this moment a ring of the bell was heard, and Bessie uttered a cry of relief.

The maid, thinking it was Spilkins, answered it, but drew back a little as she saw a gentleman with his coat-collar turned up, and his pale face streaming with rain.

“A lady has just entered this house,” he said, speaking slowly and calmly, with a kind of forced self-possession; “a lady dressed in black, with her veil down.”

“Yes, she has, sir,” responded the girl.

“That is right,” he said, with a smile, a smile as forced as his air of self-possession. “I have just parted from her, and I wanted to say another word to her. May I see her?”

The maid stood and looked at him doubtfully. She noticed that he was in evening dress, and that he had the manner and

tone of a gentleman, and she was reluctant to refuse one who might turn out to be a friend of Captain le Breton's.

"If you'll wait a minute, I'll see, sir," she said.

"Certainly," said Stracey, and he stepped in and took off his hat.

The girl went to the foot of the stairs, then, changing her mind, turned off and passed quickly to the kitchen: her mistress was the person to grapple with this new phase of these mysterious "goings on."

The moment she had gone Stracey heard Kyra's voice in the room above. He started, his lip twitched, and, after a second's hesitation, he ran lightly up the stairs and entered the room where the two girls were sitting.

Now, his disordered mind had formed no intention, no plan of action, when he had been forced, as if by some irresistible, occult influence, to follow Kyra. If there was any definite purpose it was only that of seeing who it was that so closely resembled the girl whom he had murdered, to satisfy the terror which had haunted him from the moment Kyra had "appeared" to him in the ball-room.

Terror is as insistent as love itself; and terror of the most horrible kind had got possession of him and was driving, drawing him, as a log is driven and dragged by the whirlpool. Only one thing could dispel that terror: the positive proof, by sight, by touch, and hearing, if possible, that the thing was not a ghost called up by his guilty conscience, but a real live woman who just happened to resemble Kyra. Once he had assured himself of this fact he would be at rest, at rest! He could face all else—John Warden's violence, everything—but that apparition that had almost overthrown his reason, which had made it impossible for him to remain in the house, and had driven him out into the storm and mud of the streets.

The sitting-room door was open, and impelled, drawn, by his obsession, he entered without hesitation and noiselessly.

It was Bessie who saw him first, and for a second she sat and stared at him with distended eyes and speechless, stricken dumb by the sight of him, then she shrank back, gripping Kyra's arm in an agony of terror.

Kyra turned quickly, and she, too, gazed at the white, haggard face. She, also, was stricken dumb. Could it be possible that Bessie had brought her there to meet—Stracey Froyte!

The power of speech came to Bessie first.

"Save me, save me!" she panted, almost inaudibly, and

she flung herself upon Kyra and hid her face upon her breast, and so it befell that Kyra regarded him over the head of the girl he had wronged and deserted!

But Stracey Froyte's terror-stricken eyes were fixed on Kyra's face as if he saw nothing else.

"Speak! Speak!" he gasped, hoarsely, and in the hollow, toneless voice which is peculiar to the insane, to those who are suddenly deprived of reason by some terrible shock. "Who are you?"

A thrill of horror ran through Kyra; for instinctively she recognised the madness in his eyes and speech.

"I am Kyra Jermyn," she said in a low voice. "And *this* is the girl you have so cruelly betrayed."

"Kyra Jermyn, Kyra Jermyn!" he repeated, passing his hand over his forehead upon which the sweat stood in big drops. "Kyra Jermyn. No, no!" a cunning smile crept over his face. "She's dead. I know she's dead!"

A shudder shook Kyra.

"No," she said. "I am not dead, Stracey—"

"Stracey? You call me Stracey, as if you knew me! You! Who are you? You say that she's alive—that you are— You lie!"

He crept nearer to her, his hand extended, his fingers working, his eyes glaring with the ferocity of terror, for nothing is more cruel than the terror which was driving him mad.

"Do you hear? You lie!"

Kyra sprang to her feet, but still with her arm round Bessie, who had fainted.

"Keep off!" she cried as calmly as she could, her eye meeting his steadily. "Do not touch her—or me! Leave this house—while you can. I will spare you, keep your secret—"

"Kyra? Kyra? She's dead! You—you are an imposter!" he hissed, as if he had not heard her, as, indeed, he had not. His hands were almost at her throat before Kyra called for help.

He laughed a mad laugh of derision and his hands closed upon her shoulders and she was forced down upon her knees.

"You're a devil sent to mock me!" he said, savagely. "A devil in *her* shape, with her face and voice; but I'm a match for you as I was for her. *You* Kyra! No, no! I know better; she's dead and buried—"

Kyra was fighting against the death-like sickness which preludes a swoon; the room was spinning round with her, the walls closing in upon her, she had no power to scream again.

for help, and she was resigning herself to her fate when a step was heard leaping up the stairs, and the next moment Lance burst into the room.

He uttered no cry, not a word escaped him; he flung himself upon Stracey and forced him to relinquish his grasp upon Kyra. With a snarl Stracey grappled with him and a terrible struggle ensued, for Stracey was endowed with the proverbial strength of insanity and fought with hands and teeth. The landlady and the maid stood in the doorway screaming; but Kyra knelt beside the prostrate Bessie and watched the struggle with white face and racked heart.

Locked in a deadly embrace the two men wrestled as if for life; the table was overturned, upsetting the lamp, so that the room was suddenly plunged into semi-darkness, and in this dim light Kyra saw Lance now uppermost, now under his foe, as they rolled and plunged in their fight. Lance was, in ordinary circumstances, much the stronger of the two; but Stracey fought like one possessed by seven devils; and once he got his hands on Lance's throat, and, with a guttural cry of triumph, gripped it with a deadly grip; but Lance's muscular arms were round him and crushing the breath out of him, and Stracey was forced to loosen his grasp. The moment he did so Lance was on his feet again, and, exerting all his strength, flung Stracey against the French window which opened on to the balcony outside. The window went with a crash and Stracey fell amidst the shattered glass and woodwork; but as he fell he had dragged Lance down and was feeling for his throat again, when the two women at the door were thrust aside and Bertie rushed into the room.

"Hallo—why, what!" he cried; then he, too, flung himself upon Stracey.

In an instant Stracey ceased to struggle, and he looked towards the window, the blood streaming from his face, his eyes gleaming with a cunning smile, as horrible as it was sudden.

"I—I surrender!" he gasped. "Don't—don't hurt me!"

"Look to him, Bertie!" cried Lance, and he sprang to Kyra's side.

He did not see Stracey suddenly dart through the window and Bertie disappear after him with a warning cry; he saw, was conscious of nothing but the white, lovely face looking up at him.

"Kyra!" he said, in a voice that thrilled through her.

That was all. He knew now that it was no ghost, that *it was she herself, his wife.*

"Lancel!" she breathed.

He took her, almost in his arms, and held her, looking at her with all his soul in his eyes.

"Not dead, not dead!" he whispered, almost inaudibly.

She shook her head, and a blush rose to her face, called there by something in his gaze, then she remembered Bessie.

"Oh—this poor, poor girl!" she said.

But Mrs. Simpkins and the girl were beside Bessie by this time, and with agitated cries were attempting to restore her. As if in a dream Lance saw them carry her out of the room.

He and Kyra were alone. For a moment or two they stood, she, with downcast eyes, he, regarding her with ardent, yet tender ones. At last she sank on to the sofa and he knelt beside her and took her hand.

"Kyra!" he whispered. "Tell me! Tell me all!"

He listened, still like a man in a dream, to the weird, the ghastly story of Stracey's villainy, and her desperate way of escape; his hand closing on hers at times with a fierce grip.

"Oh, my God, what you must have suffered!" broke from his lips once, as she told him in simple, unstrained language of her peril in the grim house at Heydon.

"And now?" he said, after a silence pregnant with emotion.

"Now I have found you—now you have been restored to me—will you send me away, Kyra? Will you hold me to my bond, exact it to the utmost, to the last letter?"

She hung her head.

"Your—your face is cut—" she whispered, woman-like fencing with her happiness—"let me—"

"—Never mind my face," he responded, quickly. "Answer me. No, wait! Wait until I have told you what I should have told you the day we were married. Kyra, I loved you then—I was a fool, yes, a fool, to surrender you, to let you go! I ought to have taken you in my arms and kept you there. Yes, by force if necessary. I loved you, I have never ceased to love you—even when I thought you had gone from me for ever"—he shuddered. "Your memory was more precious to me than the love of any woman could be. I love you now with all my heart and soul. Will you send me away?"

She raised her eyes for an instant only; then she sighed.

"I—I have brought you nothing but unhappiness and trouble. Better let me go—"

She moved to the door, as if she really meant to go; but he sprang to it, and locking it and putting the key in his pocket,

laughed—yes, laughed—his eyes alight with love, with derision at the idea of losing her again.

"No, no!" he said in the deep voice which was making such music in her heart. "No, no; not again, Kyra! You are my wife—my wife! Do you hear? Do you understand? I refuse to let you go. I insist—yes, insist—upon keeping you. Come to me!"

He held out his arms, his masterful eyes upon hers, devouring her, compelling her. To resist were impossible: her strength of will slipped from her. With half-shut eyes she swayed into his arms, and they closed round her as his lips met hers with their first kiss, the kiss of a passionate love that had lived even beyond the portals of death.

She was still in his arms, still listening to the sweetest words a woman can hear, her heart was still throbbing against his, when there came a knocking at the door, and Bertie's voice, husky and hurried, called:

"Open the door! Hi, Lance! You there? Open the door!"

With a lingering kiss, Lance let Kyra withdraw from his embrace, and opened the door and Bertie entered, Bertie, hatless and with his coat torn and splashed with mud.

"Gone! clean gone!" he panted. "He climbed down the balcony like a cat and got a start. I caught sight of him on the Embankment, but he gave me the slip and— Great heavens! who's this? Why—why—it's Miss Jermyn! The Miss Jermyn I knew in India, and saw—didn't I tell you I saw her at Holmby?—at the chemist's—" he broke off with amazement.

Lance took Kyra's hand and drew it over his arm.

"No, no!" he said, with a grave smile, with his eyes all aglow. "Not Miss Jermyn. This lady is my wife, Bertie, Mrs. le Breton!"

Leaving Lance to tell Bertie as much as Lance chose of his strange marriage, Kyra stole out of the room and went to Bessie. Bessie had recovered consciousness, and, though weak and shaken, was anxious to see Kyra and return home. As Kyra put her arms round her, Bessie faltered:

"Is he gone?"

"Yes, forever, dear," whispered Kyra, who knew Stracey was meant.

Bessie drew a long breath—one of relief.

"And—and the other—the gentleman who came to the Lane? It was to meet him that I asked you to come. Can you forgive me? I meant well—"

"I know," said Kyra. "There is nothing to forgive, Bes-

side. He—he is my husband. We have been parted, but now— Oh, I do not know!”

“He loves you,” whispered Bessie. “It will all come right. And you are married!” Her voice faltered with awe and gladness for Kyra’s sake. “He is good: I know it! Yes, you will be happy now. I want to go home, Mary.”

“My name is Kyra,” said Kyra; “but you shall call me Mary still, Bessie. And I will go home with you. Wait a moment.”

She went back to the sitting-room, where Lance was pacing up and down with, it must be owned, a lover’s impatience.

“She is better. I am going home with her,” she said.

“Yes, certainly,” he said. “Poor girl! Here is her letter. If I had only been here— But I went to Heydon to— to make further enquiries. Yes, we will take her to her father.”

“We?” said Kyra.

“Certainly,” he said, resolutely. And he sent Spilkins for a cab.

Lance pressed Bessie’s hand as he helped her in, but little was said until they reached the Lane. John Warden and Nolly came to meet them, and it was John who almost lifted her out, lifted her out and looking down at her with a tenderness which did not escape Kyra and Lance, who exchanged significant glances.

Kyra took her upstairs, and came down presently to find Lance talking to the two amazed men.

“Bessie will tell you all,” said Kyra, trying to speak calmly and to refrain from blushing. “I will come and see her tomorrow. I hope—I think—all her troubles are over,” she added to John, in a low voice.

His lips moved and his honest eyes shone with gratitude, but no words came—the grasp of his hand was eloquent enough.

Lance put Kyra into the cab.

“You want to rest, dearest,” he said, bending forward, his eyes pouring their love upon her.

“I—I will go home,” she said. “If you will tell him to drive to Danberry Square. It is quite near here.”

He stopped the cab and, getting out, gave the cabman some directions, and Kyra leant back and closed her eyes, trying to realise all that had happened. Suddenly she looked up.

“We are going the wrong way,” she said, in a low voice.

"I think not," responded Lance, quietly. "I am making for home."

"To Danberry Square?" she faltered.

"No; to Adelphi Terrace," he said, as quietly as before, but with his eyes smiling into her startled ones.

Then she understood, and the blood mounted to her face, and a faint exclamation escaped her lips.

"Oh—but—" she breathed. "Oh, I cannot, I cannot! Do you think I have forgotten that it was I—ah, the shame of it!—I who asked you to marry me?"

"I don't forget it at all," he retorted, his voice thrilling with love; "but I also remember that I *did* marry you, and that you are my wife."

Her eyes drooped and she trembled, but not with fear.

"But—but—it is so sudden. To-morrow—you will give me time—"

"Not a minute, not an hour," he said, resolutely. "You have had quite long enough. This is my honey-moon, Kyra, and my wife is here, opposite me, and I am taking her *home*! What! Do you think I would let you go again? Never! I was a fool once, but I have learned my lesson—even a fool can do that—and I mean to profit by it. In a word: I am your husband and—your master."

How his voice, his eyes, struck upon the chords of her heart and made wild but exquisite music!

"And your slave, my own dear love!" he murmured, and he carried her hand to his lips, and pressed it against his throbbing heart.

Spilkins had become a well-trained servant, and neither by look nor word betrayed any surprise when Lance, on their arrival at Adelphi Terrace, said, quite casually:

"Spilkins, see if you can get any supper for Mrs. le Breton and me, will you?"

And even the landlady only gasped and said, "Bless my 'eart and soul, and so that beautiful lady's his wife!" when she received the order.

Was ever a bridal supper eaten under such circumstances? Was ever a bridal supper so full of joy? For to taste joy to its fulness one must have passed through such storm and stress, such misery and sorrow, as these two had passed through.

Once only Kyra's heart failed her, and almost involuntarily she set down the glass she was raising to her lips and murmured:

"May! Oh, Lance!"

But the smile did not leave his lips and his eyes met hers unflinchingly.

"May? If there is anybody who will welcome my wife with joy and gladness it will be May," he said, very quietly. "Where do you think Bertie has gone, dearest?"

"I—I quite forgot him," Kyra admitted shamefacedly. She had forgotten everything and everyone but the man opposite her—her lover and husband.

Lance looked at his watch.

"If I know Bertie—and I think I do—he is on his way to Holmby by this time. He has gone to break the news—and for something else!"

CHAPTER XLIV.

THEY did not go down to Holmby for some days. Lance had written—though Bertie had been sent as courier in advance—and he was naturally loth to share his happiness with anyone, even those at the Hall. He wanted Kyra all to himself, and, though that was not possible, for Kyra had to say good-bye to Mr. Sutton, and Mr. Wicks and the people at the Lane, they spent the happiest of honey-moons; for, believe me, there is no place in winter like London for two persons who love each other as these two loved.

It was Love's Land for them, and it was with something like a sigh that they tore themselves away from it and went to Holmby, where they were anxiously awaited.

They arrived one winter's evening, just before dinner, and as the great hall door was flung open May herself ran down, and, the footman making way for her, wrenched open the carriage door; and she had got Kyra in her arms before she could even utter an exclamation.

"Why, Kyra! You wicked, wicked, hard-hearted girl, how could you keep us so long!" she cried, as her dewy lips met Kyra's in a sisterly, girlish kiss, the kiss of a girl for her schoolmate and sworn other-self. "Don't tell me it's Lance's fault. I know better! I know he just simply lives to do as you like."

"Indeed, May, dear, we would have come before——" began Kyra; but May could wait for no more.

"Come right in—that's American, isn't it? Bertie—I mean, Mr. Gordon," the blood rose to her fair face, "has been teaching me so much of the American language—come right in and see papa. Of course he's got the gout, but it's only a very slight attack. You won't mind if he says a swear word now and again——"

"Lord Ashleigh may say what he pleases; I shall not mind," said Kyra.

When she had drunk a cup of tea Kyra was led by May into the old earl's room.

This humble but veracious chronicler shall say nothing of the interview there; but it may be stated that when Lance appeared a little later, he met with a somewhat scornful reception.

"Oh, so you've brought her at last, have you?" remarked Lord Ashleigh, as he shook hands with his heir. "Time you did. Lance"—regretfully, and quite pityingly—"I always thought you were a sensible kind of fellow; in fact, that you were rather cute than otherwise; but I'm afraid I was wrong."

"How so, sir?" asked Lance, seating himself beside the old man and laying an affectionate hand on his shoulder. "I never laid claim to any great amount of intelligence."

"Well for you you did not," growled the old man. "To think that any man once having got such a lovely creature as that girl who has just left me, should have let her go again! Why, you must have been a d—n fool, Lance!"

Lance nodded, and gripped the still strong, firm shoulder.

"That's it in a nut-shell, sir. I was—all you call me. But, thank God, I'm not likely to be such an ass again."

"I should hope not," growled Lord Ashleigh grimly. "No man *could* be such a fool twice!"

After dinner was over and the two men had left the earl and the ladies in the drawing room and gone to smoke their good-night pipes in the smoking room, Bertie grew suddenly grave.

"Captain le Breton, may I have a word with you " he asked finally, and gazing solemnly over his pipe at Lance.

"Right you are. What is it? Fire away!" said Lance, rather absently, for he was thinking of the way in which Kyra had won the old earl's heart, just as she won the hearts of all with whom she came in contact.

"I have the honor to propose for the hand of Lady May Beechley," said Bertie.

Lance smiled and nodded.

"I expected this, Bertie," he said. "I've not been blind, though you may have thought I was. But why ask me? Why not ask the earl, her father, you know?"

"Asked him: was referred to you: said that all matters pertaining to the family and estate were referred to you now, the Master of Holmby."

"Oh," said Lance, with a smile. "Then I refer you to Mrs. le Breton, who is Mistress of the Master of Holmby."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" rejoined Bertie. "Right, oh! I may say that I am the only son and heir of my mother——"

"Not a bit of use, my dear boy!" Lance broke in, with a grin. "All Kyra will want to know is whether *you* love May and *she* loves you. Being persuaded that such is the case, Kyra wont care a brass farthing whether you are anyone's or no one's heir. See?"

"I see," said Bertie. "Then if I get Kyra's—I beg your pardon, Mrs. le Breton's consent——"

"You're right so far as I'm concerned," said Lance.

There was a moment or two of silence, then Bertie said, staring fixedly before him:

"They brought in accidental death, you know."

"Do you mean——"

"Yes; that wretched man, Stracey Froyte. They found him floating in London Pool—it's right away below the bridges, you know—and held an inquest. I was there. No, you need not blame yourself. Why should you—and Kyra—have been worried and harassed over it? I was there and gave my evidence. It seems that, after he had given me the slip, he had flung himself into the river, unnoticed."

It was some months afterward, in fact, in the late spring of the following year, that Lance and Kyra met Mrs. Froyte. They were travelling in Switzerland—a second honey-moon, Lance called it—when, at a small village near Vevey, they came upon James Froyte and his wife.

Kyra was overwhelmed, at the meeting, by the memories of the past; but Mrs. Froyte was quite calm and self-possessed; though her husband, who appeared to have sunk into premature old age, was nervous and apprehensive.

"So you will be the Countess of Ashleigh," she said calmly, eyeing Kyra—distressed and troubled by the past—"a countess. I am very glad. You know, I suppose, that James has resigned all claim to the money, that you will inherit all your father's wealth?"

Kyra, who left all business matters to her husband, did not know it, but she made a gesture which Mrs. Froyte accepted as assent.

"I want to tell you, I have always intended to tell you, whenever I met you, that Stracey was insane!"

"Insane!" echoed Kyra.

"Yes," said Mrs. Froyte, with the same calmness and self-possession. "His mother died in a mad-house. We kept the secret from him—if you remember I refused to tell you—but such was the case. Stracey had all the instincts, the selfish impulses, of the insane. But he is dead; and you—you are happy?"

"Very, very happy!" said Kyra, in a low voice.

This second honey-moon of Kyra's and Lance's was cut short by the marriage of Bertie and May.

There was another wedding, about a month later; a wedding in which Bessie and John Warden were the bride and bridegroom; and, of course, Lance and Kyra were present. They were very properly and naturally married at the parish church, and in addition to Kyra and Lance, there were present nearly the whole of the Danberry House contingent.

That night—the night of Bessie's and John's wedding—Lance and Kyra spent in London at the rooms in Adelphi Terrace which Lance still kept on.

And as they sat over the dinner which Mrs. Simpkins had so artistically provided, and at which the faithful Spilkins waited, they looked at each other in a pregnant silence.

"All's well that ends well, dearest!" said Lance.

Kyra smiled across the table at him, and stretched out her hand to meet his strong, loving one.

"Fate has dealt kindly with us, Lance," she said devoutly.

He rose from the table and put his arm round her warm, white neck.

"We'll call it Kyra's Fate!" he said.

THE END.





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